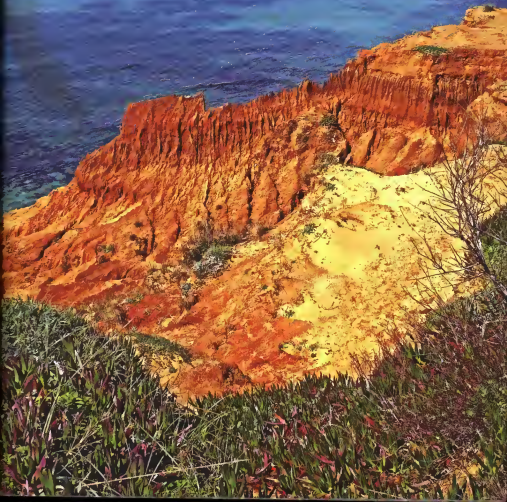


May 30, 2010–August 28, 2010

Meditations

ONE THING'S NEEDFUL



ONE THING'S NEEDFUL

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As this volume of *Meditations* is being prepared, many people throughout the world are facing financial difficulties in a way that they have not seen before or at least not in a very long time. Economic turmoil and uncertainty have not only rattled the halls of government and finance; they have filtered down to the places where we work, into our homes and families, and into our churches and schools. As God's people, we nevertheless cling to the certainty of God's Word and promises. God promises to bless and save us; to preserve and keep us; to lead, guide, and be with us through all circumstances of life until we stand at his eternal side in heaven. One way God blesses us in times of earthly uncertainty is to sharpen our focus on those promises. Jesus' words spoken in the home of Mary and Martha of Bethany come to mind. Referring to his saving Word, Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, . . . you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41,42). By God's grace, you and I also possess that one thing needful. May the devotions in this booklet help keep your faith focused on God's precious Word and promises to you in Christ.

The devotions for this volume of *Meditations* are based on the Sunday Epistle readings for Year C of the church year. Each devotion includes a Bible reference at the bottom of the page. By reading these selections, you will read through the entire Bible during the year. May the Lord bless you as you use this *Meditations* booklet.

Curtis A. Jahn
Editor, Volume 53

Landscape Photographer: Pamela L. Harper
Caption: "Mediterranean Coastal Wonder," Israel

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Meditations

ONE THING'S NEEDFUL

May 28, 2010–August 28, 2010

VOLUME 53

NUMBER 3

One Thing's Needful

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through the Saturday after
THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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The following pastors (listed alphabetically) wrote the devotions and prayers contained in this booklet: Michael Bartsch, Steven Blumer, Bart Brauer, Nathan Cordes, Aaron Glaeske, Gary Kluball, Edwin Lehmann, Jeffrey Mahnke, Mark Panning, Paul Rydecki, Michael Schultz, Paul Tessmer, Donald Thompson, Frederick Voss.

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Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1)

PEACE BEFORE GOD

"NOT GUILTY!" In a dramatic turn the judge declares the defendant "not guilty." After damaging testimony and an avalanche of evidence against him, the defendant goes free. All because another man has confessed. The defendant exhales with relief as he walks out of court. Before him lie the challenges and opportunities of a new life of freedom.

This is what has happened to us. The Bible calls it justification. Our sin and guilt earned condemnation. Before God we deserved death and eternal punishment. Suddenly Jesus stepped in. He took the blame for our sins and the punishment we deserved. His death on the cross was a real payment for it all. God the Father accepted the payment and declared us "not guilty." It's true. It happened. Believe it! You're free!

In Romans chapter 3 Paul announced the truth of our acquittal. Throughout chapter 4 he asserted that we receive the benefits of that acquittal simply by trusting in Jesus. Here in chapter 5 he proclaims the blessings of that acquittal in our lives.

The first blessing is that "we have peace with God through our

Lord Jesus Christ." Literally we have peace "before" God. This means that we can stand before the face of God without feeling ashamed. We did not just get off on a technicality. It was not some miscarriage of justice that set us free. We don't have to wonder how God really feels about us. We don't have to worry that he will change his mind and hold our sins against us in the end.

That's because Jesus really paid for our sins. He endured the punishment. Jesus died for us. His sacrifice was real. And God really accepted it.

So now we have peace. Real peace. God declares it to be so. He is not angry. Our sins are gone. We stand before him with confidence because of Jesus. We know that the Father accepts us and approves of us because of what his Son did for us.

Just like the acquitted defendant, we are free to live a new life. Throughout this week we will explore the blessings we receive in this new life because of divine acquittal. Rejoice today in the first of these blessings—peace before God!

Dear God, I do not deserve the peace you give through Jesus. Yet it is real because he really died for me and you have set me free. Give me the Holy Spirit so that I trust in Jesus and enjoy living in peace before you. Amen.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. (Romans 5:1,2)

ACCESS INTO GRACE

Access is a privilege. Walk into a world-class country club with a bag of clubs hanging off your shoulder and ask how much it costs to play a round of golf. Or just browse periodicals on the Internet to see if you can access all the information they contain. It's not free. You have to buy a membership or subscription. Whether it costs \$20,000 a year or just \$29.95, access is a privilege.

God's Word today says that through Jesus we have gained access by faith into God's grace. Simply through believing in Jesus (trusting that he paid our way) we have access.

There are two things Paul emphasizes about this access. First, it is access into grace. Grace is God's undeserved love for sinners. It is his favor toward us.

The second thing Paul emphasizes is that we stand in this grace. That means something. We're not just passing by and receiving a taste like you get at those grocery store demonstration tables. Grace surrounds us. Grace accompanies us wherever we go. Grace is not something available Monday through

Friday from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. ET. Grace is our entire life. We stand in God's grace. In Jesus, our entire existence is in the grace of God, and we never find ourselves outside of it.

That's a comfort! We find ourselves wrapped in the security blanket of God's undeserved love. Whatever challenges you face today, you face them standing in the grace of God. Whatever pains or sorrows or uncertainties you endure, you endure them standing in the grace of God. Whatever hurdles you approach, enemies you meet, or ridicule you receive, you will prevail because you stand in the grace of God.

People pay a lot for access. There is no more wonderful place to which we could gain access than the grace of God. Thanks to Jesus we enjoy access into God's grace, full and free.

One more thing—it's a lifetime membership. The eternal kind. That's because when it comes to God's undeserved love there is no expiration date. So enjoy your access. Take comfort that you stand in the grace of God.

**All blessing, honor, thanks, and praise
To Father, Son, and Spirit,
The God who saved us by his grace—
All glory to his merit!
O Triune God in heav'n above,
You have revealed your saving love;
Your blessed name be hallowed! Amen. (CW 390:6)**

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:2)

THE HOPE OF GLORY

We are now one-third of the way through the Major League Baseball season. Some upstart teams are a surprise to the baseball experts. But the hometown fans aren't so surprised. They're starting to boast. They have visions of a September playoff race, of games in October, maybe even the World Series. That's one effect of good fortune. You begin to boast.

The apostle Paul says that we boast. But that sounds a little proud. The translators of our verse used the word *rejoice*. It's not a proud boast. It is a boast born of the confidence that we now enjoy peace with God and we stand in his grace, thanks to Jesus.

So we boast. We are so happy about our new fortune, our freedom from sin, our good standing in grace that we cannot keep quiet about it. "We exult in the hope of the glory of God" (NASB). We find joy not only in the fact that we live at peace with God and we stand secure in his grace. We begin to think about the future implications of being right with God. We anticipate what is yet to come.

Father in heaven, by your Holy Spirit open our minds to appreciate the peace and grace in which we live each day. Then, as we treasure these gifts, increase our hope in the glory yet to come. Amen.

Like baseball fans looking forward to the exciting outcome of a winning season, we look forward to the glory that will unfold when Jesus comes again. He will return in glory together with all the angels. He will gather all believers to himself. He will change our lowly bodies so that they will be glorious like his. He will bring us with him to fully enjoy his heavenly glory. There we will dwell forever and ever. No sin or pain or problem will mar our enjoyment of God's perfect glory.

"We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." It is a constant joy that we carry in our hearts and express with words. This joy makes us happy and confident about the future God has planned for us. We live each day with a positive outlook because we stand in grace, and we have the certain hope of glory.

If that baseball team keeps winning, the excitement of the fans just builds and builds. Our lives as people standing in grace and striving for glory is like that too. We draw closer day by day to the glory that is yet to come. All this makes our joy and eager anticipation grow!

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance. (Romans 5:3)

WE REJOICE IN OUR SUFFERINGS

Nobody likes to suffer. Children fear the needle that delivers a vaccination. Adults wince at the pain of physical therapy after surgery. If somebody says, "I like pain," we shake our heads in wonder. So we find it puzzling when the apostle Paul says, "We also rejoice in our sufferings."

Here in Romans chapter 5, Paul explains why a Christian finds joy in the difficulties he or she presently suffers. Remember what Paul just said in verse 2, "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." We exult as we anticipate the joys of heaven that await us. That means everything we suffer now is temporary. Pain and suffering, diseases of body and mind, the grief of losing those we love. Also the hurt of rejection, the ache of loneliness, even the agony of doubts and fears. All the pains that afflict us in this life are temporary. Even when we must suffer through them for months or bear up under them for years, we do it pressing on in eagerness for the day when Jesus will come.

Suffering can wear you out and make you give up. It can prompt you to "curse God and die," as Job's wife suggested. It can make

you miserable, wallowing in defeat and death. People sometimes say, "I just want to die." It's all they have to look forward to. There is no joy in the midst of suffering that leads to death. It is hopeless.

Paul explains, "We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance." Suffering is different when you hold in your heart the hope of glory. Then suffering increases your longing for heaven's glory. Then you grow more and more eager for Jesus' coming. You say, "I just want to be with Jesus; I want to go home to heaven." That is perseverance. That is patient, faith-filled waiting. Even though the suffering is bad, there is joy in the midst of it. In the depths of such suffering, the child of God sees a good end to it all. The believer sees the great contrast between the bitterness of this suffering and the perfect deliverance and life with Jesus.

So let's join Paul and rejoice in suffering. Rejoice in patient longing as you anticipate the day of Jesus. Yearn in eagerness for that day of glory when all struggles will end and eternal joys will begin.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come with compassion as we face our struggles. Come stay with us as our divine companion. Come in your glory to take us home. Amen.

Perseverance [produces] character. (Romans 5:4)

GENUINE CHRISTIANS

Sometimes the world likes to dismiss Christians as superficial and fake. "They pretend to be constantly happy." "They are not real." So it seems to some who look at us.

Some preachers have fueled this myth. They preach a "health, wealth, and success" brand of religion in the name of Jesus. Prosperity religions never lose their appeal. The message attracts people and it distorts what true Christianity is.

Some devout Christians get caught up in the dangerous myth that if you are a true Christian, everything in your life is great. So when life takes a bad turn, we may be tempted to turn away from worship and the family of believers we need. If we are going through tremendous grief, we may feel out of place at church because we think it is a place for people who have it all together. If our family is struggling with a rebellious child, we may stop going to church because we don't fit the model of the perfect Christian family anymore. Yes, the devil uses this myth to distort the truth about Christians and lead some to despair.

In this short sentence, the apostle Paul tells us where genuine Christian character originates. It doesn't come from having a perfect

life. It doesn't come from putting on a "good Christian" face. Genuine Christian character is the product of perseverance in the midst of life's trials. The word for character is the word used to describe precious metals that have been tested by fire and refined. It describes people who have passed through the furnace of life's toils and tragedies. The false props have melted away. The sham of pride is gone like a mist. All that is left is the genuine trust in Jesus Christ that defines the real Christian. God's Word calls it character wrought of perseverance.

True Christianity is not a prosperity religion. It is a *perseverance* religion. When you have persevered through suffering, a wonderful fruit becomes evident—genuineness. People look at you and say, "This person is real."

Real Christians don't put on masks to impress. They persevere through trial, knowing that their real treasure is in heaven. Not everything right now is great. The day may be cloudy, and the storms may not soon pass. But when your trust is firmly rooted in Jesus your Savior, everything in your future with him is perfectly secure. The long-range forecast calls for sunny days and eternal joys.

Lord God, you have promised that the refining fire will not consume your children. Prove this true in my life, even as you do your work in me. Amen.

Character [produces] hope. (Romans 5:4)

HOPE-FILLED CHRISTIANS

One more thing about that persevering Christian who is being refined in the fire of Christian suffering. That person holds in his or her heart the tremendous hope of what is yet to come. How fitting. Life here is riddled with pain. Every movement involves struggle. There is one thing left. Hope.

Hope. The hope of heaven. Hope is unwavering confidence that dwells in the heart of the persevering believer. Hope clings to God's promises with heart and mind.

Worldly hope says, "I wish it would happen, but I'm not sure." Worldly hope crosses its fingers and rolls the dice. Worldly hope is born of a world where "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The ruin, decay, struggle, and death that sin has brought into our world cast a pall of defeat over our entire existence. So we hope for the best and settle for what we get. How sad!

But Christian hope is different. Jesus came into this mess and he died for our sins. Then he rose in complete triumph over everything that robbed us of hope. He crushed the power of sin and the devil, of defeat and death. God's Word declares that all "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ

Jesus" (Romans 3:24). And we know what this justification, this acquittal before God, means. We stand secure in God's grace. We exult in our expectation of heaven.

The results of Jesus' victory over all our struggles are at work right now. We rejoice, even as we suffer. This suffering produces perseverance. That perseverance produces hope.

Christian hope is rock-solid expectation that never disappoints. That's because Jesus' life and sacrifice and triumph back it up. We hope, knowing that the Creator, Savior, and sanctifier God stands behind his Word. We hope, anticipating a bright dawn when Jesus' victory will shine with brilliance that no eye will mistake. We hope with such absolute certainty because we have a divine contract signed with holy blood.

Perseverance produces hope. Think about this every time you endure trouble, trial, tears, tragedy, or terror. As you endure it with trust in your Savior and with confidence in the day of his deliverance, your hope increases. That hope comforts you in your struggles. Thoughts of eternal blessings lighten the weight of present burdens. Even in dark times, Christian hope anticipates the lasting joy to come.

Lord Jesus, increase my hope in you. Cause me to think today not about what is behind me but about the glory that is to come when you return in glory. Amen.

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Romans 5:5)

THE SPIRIT SUSTAINS THE HOPEFUL

"Don't get your hopes up too high," a concerned mother warns her daughter about the prospect of making the volleyball team. Parents temper the high hopes of their children. They know the disappointment that can happen when you apply for a college that accepts 12 percent of applicants. Or when your résumé sits in a tall stack. Or when the doctor says the five-year survival rate is 27 percent.

God announces that this hope on which we set our hearts will not disappoint. That's because he "has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

In Ephesians chapter 1, the apostle Paul tells us that we have received the Holy Spirit as a deposit from God guaranteeing our inheritance as his people. The Holy Spirit is present in our lives, at work in our hearts, as proof that God will give us everything he has promised. The Holy Spirit is a down payment from God that tells us how serious God is about delivering us from present struggles to glory.

Notice what Paul says: "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit." Why did Paul use the words, "poured out"? Did he want us to think of Holy Baptism, the wonderful event through which God's love and the Holy Spirit first took hold in our hearts? Or did he just want us to picture God's love as something flowing from a great pitcher into our hearts and filling us up? Either of these pictures, or both, offer us a vivid illustration of how richly God loves us.

God did this pouring of his love into our hearts in person. He poured out his love into us through the person of the Holy Spirit. No wonder Paul can say that this hope we hold in our hearts will not disappoint. God the Holy Spirit is at work in us. The Holy Spirit keeps reminding us of God the Father's love and Jesus' saving love. God's personal work in you to keep you mindful of his love gets your hopes up.

So keep hoping. Keep hoping for the day when Jesus will appear in glory. Get your hopes up high! The Holy Spirit guarantees you won't be disappointed!

Holy Spirit, continue to dwell in my heart and work in my life, reminding me of God's great love. Strengthen me when I would lose hope. Even as I face deflating setbacks, assure me that Christian hope never disappoints. Amen.

Paul . . . and all the brothers with me, To the churches in Galatia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:1-3)

FROM US, TO YOU, GRACE AND PEACE

It's nice to know who wrote you a letter before you start reading it so you can make sense of the message. So Paul put his name at the beginning of his letter to the Galatians. That's how letters began in Bible times.

While it was Paul who wrote to the Galatians, all the brothers with him approved of his message. These brothers were fellow believers in Jesus. They and Paul loved the Galatian Christians. Their faith in the Savior made them all family.

We belong to God's family too! It's a large family. All believers on earth and in heaven are family—our brothers and sisters in Christ. We love them. They love us. We get to spend eternity together because of Jesus.

Paul wrote this letter to churches. A church is a group of people who gather around God's Word and sacraments. Paul was writing to four churches in Galatia, the central area of Asia Minor, now part of present-day Turkey. The Lord preserved copies of Paul's letter so we could benefit from reading it too.

Soon Paul would take the Galatian churches to task for turning

away from the gospel, the good news about Jesus. But first he wanted to remind them about the great blessings they had through the gospel.

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." We sinners need grace. We need God to look favorably on us. If it weren't for his grace, the Lord would have to give us what we deserve for disrespecting him and hurting people—punishment. Because God is favorably disposed toward us, he doesn't count any of our sins against us. He counted them against Jesus instead. And Jesus paid the penalty.

It's a good thing God's grace is free. We couldn't earn it or buy it, so he just gave it to us—no charge.

Now we have peace with God. He's not hostile toward us about our sin. And we don't hate him anymore. His grace brought us peace in Jesus.

The Galatian Christians were in danger of losing their place in heaven. They needed to hear: "Grace and peace to you from God" so they would stick with the gospel.

Lord, thank you for making me part of your family. Please hold us all close to you through your Word and sacraments, so we stick with the gospel. Amen.

Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead. (Galatians 1:1)

SENT BY JESUS CHRIST—ALIVE!

The Galatian Christians were in danger of losing their faith. False teachers had visited their churches. These teachers attacked both the gospel and its messenger, Paul.

When we're attacked, it's natural to take it personally. We might even lash out against those who have falsely accused us. Let's be careful. It's easy to overreact, to say more than we should, to hurt those who have hurt us. Or sometimes we don't say anything. We keep the pain bottled up inside where it festers. There's a better way, a way in between these two extremes, a calm answer that states the truth and glorifies God.

When Paul was attacked, he understood that it wasn't really about him. It was about God and the gospel and the church. So when Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians as his defense against the attacks of the false teachers, notice where he pointed the believers—to Jesus Christ, raised from the dead by the Father. Jesus really died on the cross, taking the full punishment for our sins. We have been redeemed. But Jesus didn't stay dead. Now he is alive!

Lord Jesus, you have sent me to share your saving message. If anyone attacks me or your message, help me to react in ways that are pleasing to you. Amen.

As if all that wasn't enough, this living Jesus had sent Paul to proclaim the good news to the Galatians. Paul hadn't made up any of his teachings. He was an apostle. *Apostle* means one who is "sent out." Since Jesus and the Father had sent Paul out to the Galatians, they really ought to listen to Paul. They ought to stick with the gospel.

As I wrote this devotion, a Christian called to talk to the pastor. She didn't give her name, but she has been going through a tough time at her church in a different denomination. Not only was she ready to quit that church, she felt like quitting all churches. What a blessing to have this part of Galatians in mind with its encouragement to stick with the gospel!

Satan certainly wants us all to lose our place in heaven. He treats trouble as an opportunity to drive a wedge between us and the Lord or between us and the messengers of the Lord.

We don't have to let him trick us. Remember that the living Lord Jesus still sends out messengers today. His true teachers will hold out the gospel to us as the most important thing.

... the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. (Galatians 1:3,4)

RESCUED FROM THE PRESENT EVIL AGE

A kitty-cat meows in fear near the top of a tree till a friendly fire-fighter climbs up and brings it safely back down to the ground. A burning boat is about to go down when a helicopter appears to save the crew. A non-mechanic motorist at the side of the road kicks a flat tire in frustration just as a tow truck pulls up to help. We love a good rescue.

It warms our hearts to remember the best rescue of all. God looks down from his throne of grace and spots people in trouble. They don't always talk nicely to those in their family. They disguise their greed as "working long hours." They worry, as if God won't take good care of them. They convince themselves they aren't as bad as others. They often live like God doesn't even exist, doing whatever they please, as if there's no day of reckoning in their future.

Paul was right! This present age is evil.

Now for the tough truth. We not only live in this present evil

age, we too often contribute our own evil to it. We need rescue.

Praise be to God! Our Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age. Our God and Father planned this rescue from eternity. It was his will to carry it out. How blessed we are!

Unfortunately, until our last day on earth, we will contribute more evil to this age. Our evil brings trouble to ourselves and our loved ones in the present. But in the age to come, we will be free from evil.

There's a reason why Paul reminded his dear brothers and sisters in the Galatian churches about being rescued from sin by Jesus' death. They were turning away from Jesus, from the only path to a happy afterlife.

You and I are regularly tempted to turn away from Jesus. The good news can seem boring and old. False prophets always have fresh material and exciting ways of delivering it. But stick with the gospel. Jesus is the only rescuer from this present evil age.

Dear Savior, thank you for saving me from my sin. Help me see my sins as big and terrible. Then help me see your rescue of me as huge and awesome and exciting and refreshing, so that I never get tired of the good news. Amen.

... our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.
(Galatians 1:4,5)

GLORY BE TO GOD!

Try this courageous experiment. Ask people you know for permission to interview them. Or ask people you meet whether you may give them a one-question survey. If they agree, say, "What is your purpose in life?"

Before you try this experiment on others, can you answer the question yourself? Do you know your purpose in life?

A new parent might answer, "My purpose in life right now is to feed and care for my new baby." A medical researcher might respond, "My purpose in life is to discover a cure for disease." A waste management employee might say, "I pick up trash to keep the world clean."

But your true purpose, Christian, goes beyond bodily needs. Read the passage at the top of the page again. Your purpose in life is to glorify God. In case you'd like a better proof passage, consider 1 Corinthians 10:31. "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Do you perceive how pervasive this purpose is? Can you murder to the glory of God? No, the commandments cover this and other sins. Can you enter a bar to the glory of God? Possibly, but not to

get drunk or to watch improper entertainment. Can you gamble to the glory of God? Watch out. Very dangerous. Be careful here. Can you yell at crazy drivers or at your loved ones to the glory of God? There are more productive ways to communicate (see Ephesians 4:15,29). So you see how our purpose restricts bad behavior.

But what about good behavior? Our purpose points the way. Can you listen to God's Word to the glory of God? Can you clean your home, wash dishes, and do laundry to the glory of God? Can you give offerings to the glory of God? Can you fill your mind with excellent and praiseworthy topics? Can you be gainfully employed or spend your retirement to the glory of God? Now for the issue the Galatians were struggling with: can you close your ears to false teachers and stick with the gospel to the glory of God?

All good behaviors and attitudes are possible with help from the Lord. He motivates us to work at it by assuring us that we are forgiven in Jesus. That's the gospel. Sticking with the gospel is the best way to say: Glory be to God!

Trlune God, you are glorious whether people notice your glory or not. Help me remember your love and my purpose in life so that I keep glorifying you. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. (Galatians 1:6,7)

TURN TO A DIFFERENT GOSPEL? NO!

So far the apostle Paul has reminded the Galatians (and us) how glorious God was to rescue sinners through Jesus, now raised from the dead. In this way he has prepared them (and us) for a sharp rebuke.

It's hard for fellow Christians to rebuke us. First they have to deal with the astonishment. It makes them scratch their heads in wonder whenever we get out of step with God's will. Paul was amazed, and not in a good way, when he heard reports that the churches in Galatia had begun to turn away from the grace of Christ.

Remember: grace is the free gift of God's favor toward sinners. Earlier, while Paul was among them, the Galatians had rejoiced to know that their sins were forgiven at no cost to them.

But those sneaky false teachers had appealed to that part of humans which does not like free grace. Our sinful nature always wants at least a little bit of the credit for every good in our lives. It prefers a grace that it can help

pay for by doing some good or by avoiding some evil or by comparing ourselves to others who are supposedly worse.

Oh, you caught it too, huh? There's no such thing as "grace that you can help pay for." Just like there's no such thing as a different gospel. Any gospel that says you must do something to be worthy of forgiveness is no gospel at all.

But then our sinful nature tries to throw us into confusion again by asking, "What did I do to deserve this trouble?" Thus subtly insinuating that we haven't done anything wrong. But, in truth, we daily sin much. We need forgiveness.

In Christ we have it. The gospel says Jesus did everything necessary to save us from sin. We contribute nothing. We don't even ask God into our hearts until after the Holy Spirit is already there.

Shall we desert the Lord? Shall we allow the gospel to be perverted? Shall we turn to a different message? No! Stick with the gospel—where God's favor is free.

Lord Jesus, help me see when my sinful nature or a false teacher is trying to change the gospel. Help me share the good news of your free grace with others, so that no one is confused about how they get to heaven. Amen.

Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:8,9)

PREACHING ANOTHER "GOSPEL" LEADS TO TROUBLE

Imagine you are part of a new congregation. Your pastor is the kind who gets a new church started and then moves on to gather another congregation. He leaves your church in the hands of the capable elders, who take turns preaching and teaching. Things are going well.

One Sunday a guest mentions he is a pastor. He asks if the congregation would like him to preach next Sunday. It seems like a good idea, so everyone agrees.

The guest pastor points to Jesus as the Savior. He encourages the people to live for the Lord, turning away from all sin. The message sounds like what the church is used to hearing, so the people ask him to preach again, and then again.

As the Sundays pass, his message changes ever so slightly. "Living for the Lord and turning away from all sin" becomes the focus. The pastor still mentions Jesus and the cross and the empty tomb. But he insinuates that if you really want to get to heaven, you can secure your place right now by a simple surgical procedure. He promises to tell you more next Sunday.

The whole congregation is abuzz. What could it be? Everyone can

hardly wait to find out how to guarantee their spot in heaven.

Sunday comes. The pastor preaches an exciting sermon on how Abraham believed God's promise about the coming Savior. But then God required him and all the males in his household to be circumcised. So we should do the same.

Some are persuaded. Others know there's terrible trouble in this teaching but can't explain what. The pastor preaches about this again, and more people are convinced. Someone notifies the pastor who formed the congregation, the apostle Paul, and he writes the letter to the Galatians.

Jesus didn't do enough? You have to do something more? This lie leads to trouble. No, that's an understatement. Paul says such teachers should be eternally condemned. Later he writes, "If you let yourselves be circumcised [that is, if you try to get to heaven this way], Christ will be of no value to you at all. [You are then] obligated to obey the whole law. . . . You have fallen away from grace" (Galatians 5:2-4).

Stick with the gospel. No trouble here.

Lord, thank you for doing everything necessary to rescue us from sin. Amen.

Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Galatians 1:10)

SERVANTS OF CHRIST PLEASE GOD

Paul had just rebuked the Christians in Galatia for turning from the gospel and following a teaching that says "Jesus didn't do enough; we have to help him save us." Paul had also condemned the false teachers as worthy of suffering forever in hell. Does this sound harsh to our modern ears? If so, there's something wrong with our ears. Perhaps we've bought into the philosophy that says "There's good in everyone, and every good person goes to heaven."

It's not easy to condemn talented teachers who lead others away from Jesus. It doesn't help us please people or win their approval. It could drive them away from us when we want to unite everyone in Christ. We dislike division, even when it's necessary to preserve the truth.

So why do we do it? Why insist on holding to the whole truth of the Bible? Because servants of Christ please God. We'd like to please people too and win their approval, but we won't do so if it means displeasing God.

When you read Paul's questions above, does he sound defensive? Do his questions seem to come out of nowhere? It helps if we read between the lines.

Lord, grant me wisdom so I know how to treat people as I strive to please you. Amen.

The false teachers had smeared Paul with a negative attack. Paul, you see, had correctly taught the Galatians that Jesus fulfilled the whole law of God; and for this reason, they were no longer obligated to sacrifice sheep or rest on Saturday or make pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem or be circumcised. Apparently the false teachers accused Paul of trying to win the Galatians over to Christ by making things easy on them. "Paul is just trying to please you. Serving Christ is much harder than Paul teaches. The Old Testament laws must still be obeyed."

Paul's sharp rebuke of the Galatians and the false teachers showed that he was not interested in pleasing people if it meant displeasing God. He hoped his sharp rebuke would lead them to stick with the gospel.

Sometimes we need to confront wrong teachings or bad behavior. Let's not turn Paul's example into an excuse to be harsh. Let's win people's approval with gentleness and respect. But if they force us to choose between pleasing them and pleasing the Lord, we servants of God will please him, even if it means rebuking people.

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11,12)

THE GOOD NEWS IS PURELY DIVINE

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Queen Gertrude comments, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." People will ardently deny something to try to cover up how true it actually is. Mark Twain once wrote, "If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything." As opposed to having to remember everything about a lie you told (so as not to get caught in it), it's much easier to be truthful. Shakespeare and Twain had a knack for writing dead-ringer descriptions of the human condition. It's not very surprising that human beings should be able to offer keen human insights.

What would be surprising is if human beings could have divine insights. They can't, but that hasn't stopped them from trying. So much of what humans have tried to sell regarding the divine has tragically boiled down to completing the sentence "If I were God . . ." In the religions of men, flawed, limited, utterly human ideas about God are all thrown into a blender and what's poured out is an empty caricature of who God really is. Invariably, he is

cast as one who must be appeased by human beings who arrogantly assume that they can.

Simply put, God is divine and we are not. That will always be a gap we cannot bridge. So in hearing from God what we need to know about him, we are not shocked to find out that his way of having us be close to him is something we never would have dreamed. It's not a story of human appeasement of the divine, but of divine love for every human. No human being, in his or her right mind or otherwise, would ever have cast God's holy Son to become filthy with our sin and cursed by his loving Father. That's an entirely nonhuman story line: Jesus paid for all your sins with his blood. Good news like that is purely divine. But it's the true story that has saved your immortal soul.

Paul was undoubtedly neck and neck in an IQ race with a Shakespeare or a Twain, but as a human being, he needed to have divine grace revealed and uncovered for him too. Praise God that his Holy Spirit has flooded your human heart and mind with divine grace and peace in Christ.

Father, you have revealed to me your inconceivable, incredible grace in Christ. Let divine peace through Jesus blanket my body and soothe my soul. Amen.

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. (Galatians 1:13,14)

ONLY THE GOSPEL CLEANSSES COMPLETELY

A fairy tale about Bluebeard relates how he gave all the house keys to his wife when he left on business, forbidding her access to only one room, a closet at the end of a long corridor. She opened it, of course, and there found the dead bodies of his previous wives. Thus we have the phrase "skeletons in the closet." What are yours?

Paul had plenty. Beliefs and actions he thought to be so right were so terribly wrong. What Paul saw as service to God was pure sin. Teachings he so zealously held to were trash. If only he could rewrite or forget his past, but neither was going to happen. His history was his, and he had hell coming for it.

A little "harmless" greed or hate or lust doesn't seem to stack up next to actively persecuting the church or killing Christians. The problem is that the punishment due to us for our sinful history is the same punishment that was due Paul for his. What is there that's going to clean the skeletons out of our closets?

Paul had just finished tying into the Galatians for going along

with preachers who were selling them the bill of goods that said "What you believe coupled with what you do will save you. If you don't observe the laws of Moses, you will surely be condemned." Keeping rules intended only for Israelites, rules only in force until Christ came, could never clean away anything or clean up anyone. Foregoing a ham sandwich doesn't wash away the grime of greed. Killing a sacrificial lamb doesn't clear a conscience. Such practices and images did, however, point to the clean life and the sacrificial death of Jesus. Forgiveness is found in him. Only the truth about Jesus our substitute cleanses completely.

Paul had been brought to know that truth personally, and the Holy Spirit has chosen to use Paul's life to bring that truth home to you and me. There is no sin so despicable and no personal history so reprehensible that the holy blood of Jesus cannot wash it away. That all your sin has been washed away is already a matter of record. Christ's grave is empty, and so is your closet.

Lord Jesus, hide your face from my sin and blot out all my iniquity. Amen.

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man. (Galatians 1:15,16)

THE GOOD NEWS IS OVERFLOWING WITH GRACE

In Revelation, Jesus pictures a group of souls stationed beneath the altar in heaven. For their unflinching faith in and testimony about the Savior, they had paid a dear price. They are the martyrs who were murdered by enemies of the cross of Christ. Their question is one of great wondering: "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Revelation 6:10).

We could rightly understand some of those martyrs to have been waiting for God's vengeance to fall on Saul. This man's fanatical, bloody persecutions had ended their earthly lives. For the welfare of Jesus' church, every ounce of common sense would say that Saul should have been eliminated. It is not conventional military wisdom to wait patiently for your sworn enemy to come around to your way of thinking. You eliminate him at your first chance.

God's wisdom, however, is far from conventional. It is incomprehensible. Unbeknown to Saul, God had set him apart from birth to be one of history's strongest proponents of the Christian faith he

had once tried to destroy. The God of grace led Saul to both see and believe that the Jesus he hated was the Savior he needed more than anything else.

The good news about Jesus is overflowing with grace. Our natural sinfulness, our evil activities, and our Bibles clearly reveal us to have been God's sworn enemies. Every ounce of common sense would say that God should have eliminated us at his first opportunity. Instead, the Lord of grace did the unthinkable. He didn't destroy us, and he definitely didn't wait for us to come around. He turned us around. Having set us apart from before birth, he called us by grace. Inside our very souls, he uncovered Jesus for us, causing us to believe in his unconventional wisdom that declares, "In condemning my Son, I have adopted you as my sons and daughters."

Saul, who added to the number of martyrs, later became one. That is grace! "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Psalm 115:3). It pleased him to redeem you through the blood of Christ, convert you, and claim you as his own. That is grace!

Thank you, Lord, for setting me apart from before birth and calling me by grace to know that Jesus has made me your child and an heir of heaven. Amen.

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man. (Galatians 1:15,16)

GOD'S GOSPEL TARGETS ALL NATIONS

A trip to Germany as a teenager has been my greatest exposure to a foreign culture. Observing the stark differences between one side of the Berlin Wall and the other, and seeing its armed guards, barricades, and barbed wire made a lasting impression.

With more than 90 percent of the world's population not residing in the United States, it is somewhat naïve to think that most people consider baseball, hot dogs, and apple pie the trademark staples of their existence. With US cities and college campuses having representation from virtually every nation under heaven, our economy is not the only thing that is global. More and more our communities are.

Not by accident but by divine design, Paul grew up as a Jew in Tarsus and was thus also exposed to Roman and Greek culture. God's eternal plan for Paul included not only a miraculous conversion to the Christian faith but also years of concentrated mission work in non-Jewish societies. To a great extent, Paul would be regularly rubbing shoulders with "people who weren't like him." Yet they were like him. Like the

people you know and meet whose first culture is not the same as your own, both you and they have a burning need for grace. Our Lord has always had the crosshairs of the scope of his gospel trained on all people of all nations.

These days you needn't travel overseas to find them. They may prefer different restaurants than you, but you regularly see them at the soccer field, in the classroom, and at the gas station. It is God's fervent desire that you also see them in your church, gathered around Word and sacrament. God would have you know people of different cultures as your dear Christian friends.

Whatever your setting, the Holy Spirit will make this happen. You fall far short of all that God requires, making hell what you deserve. God fully corrected this shortfall by the life and death of Jesus, your substitute, winning heaven for all. This is true for everyone you know, whether they believe it right now or not. Trust God that through his Word and through you, he will work to make people who are "not like you" just like you—redeemed, restored, and forgiven!

Lord God, may your gospel never be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people. Amen.

But when God . . . was pleased to reveal his Son in me . . . I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem. (Galatians 1:15-18)

PEACE IN JESUS IS AN ENDLESS WELLSPRING OF TRUTH

It's Good Friday. The chancel appointments are draped in black. The silence is broken as the Word of God is read. The sermon is based on Isaiah 53:6: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, . . . and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." You've heard that message in the past, but on this particular day, the preacher weaves in truths about that text and timely personal applications that truly hit home. In thinking of your own grievous sins from your past, you are reduced to tears of humble joy to know the depth of God's love for you in offering up his beloved Son to make all your guilt go away.

How is it that many hundreds of sermons from that one chapter have hit home for many millions of Christians over centuries of time? It is that way because the message of peace in Jesus is an endless wellspring of truth. Prior to his conversion, Paul had undoubtedly studied those very words of Isaiah any number of times but not seen Jesus at all.

After meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus and having his heart of stone turned into a heart of flesh, Paul spent a total of three years in Arabia and Damascus. You can be sure that Jesus literally jumped off the page of Isaiah's prophecy, so that Paul clung to him as the Lamb who was slain for him. The vein of God's love in Christ runs through all the Scriptures, and the Lord had Paul devote a healthy amount of time toward mining those truths before placing him into public ministry.

As this summer draws to a close, future preachers and teachers of God's grace in Christ will make their way into classrooms to spend years studying the same gospel Isaiah preached, the same good news Paul studied and later proclaimed. Your support and encouragement of these future heralds of grace is a delight to the God who has purchased you with the blood of Christ. Your own study of these Scriptures will leave you hungry for more, and God's Word will always satisfy.

Let the Word of Christ dwell in me richly, Lord, so that I live to serve you, my King and my God. Amen.

Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. (Galatians 1:18-20)

THE GOSPEL OF YOUR SALVATION: NO ENDORSEMENTS REQUIRED

When Jesse Owens grabbed the world's attention by winning four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic games, it's a sure bet that he didn't rake in a cool million in endorsements from any sports apparel companies. Sponsorship then certainly wasn't what it has become now. There's hardly a golfer on the professional tour who isn't wearing someone's insignia or logo. "If so-and-so drives it or wears it or uses it, it must be good."

After three years of study and meditation and growth in the Word of God, the former persecutor turned preacher made his way to the holy city, the center of Jewish religious life, Jerusalem. He wasn't seeking sponsorships or endorsements in order to secure funds for launching a ministry. He didn't need Peter's stamp of approval or a glowing endorsement from James, the Lord's brother, because what he proclaimed was neither from men nor dependent on men. The promise of undeserved life in Christ

instead of deserved death in hell, as a message straight from God, was so important for Paul's hearers to know that he swore to it with an oath.

God's Word stands on its own two feet. Nobody needs to drop any names alongside it to make it more appealing or believable. It has the name that is above every name as both its author and main character—Jesus Christ. In that name is the assurance that the child of Bethlehem and the man on the middle cross is the one whom God chose to rescue you from being shut out from the presence of the Lord forever. Life and peace and power and joy are in that name.

A day is too long to let your Bible lie idle. So in the very near future, when next you pick it up, remember that it doesn't need to be pitched by some great salesman, edited by some great scholar, or interpreted for you by some great theologian. Just pick it up and read it, and trust the God who wrote it to bless it.

Jesus, you are the true God and eternal life. When I read God's Word, let me hear your voice and know your grace and live in peace. Amen.

Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they praised God because of me. (Galatians 1:21-24)

PRAISE THE LORD FOR HIS LIFE-CHANGING GOOD NEWS!

There can be no debate about it. You are a miracle, plain and simple!

It may be true that dead men tell no tales, but it is irrefutably true that spiritually dead people don't and can't do anything. They can make no motions toward God and are completely incapable of securing God's favor. The man whose words to the Galatians we have reviewed this week was as spiritually dead as dead can be, even persecuting the people of Christ to their death. Spiritual death, however, comes in all shapes and sizes. It appears in the good and helpful but unbelieving grandmother next door, in the fun-loving, very gifted but unbelieving guy or gal with whom you play softball, and in every newborn child. As sure as you're reading this, it appeared in you with all its ugliness and wickedness and damning guilt.

The almighty God, the maker of heaven and earth, commissioned his Son to carry out your rescue. Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and

was buried. On the third day he rose again from the dead. Through your baptism in his name, God brought you to life and washed your sins away for good. He continues to sustain within you a heart that is beating with spiritual life. You are a miracle, plain and simple. As a believer in Jesus, you are the miraculous result of God's life-changing good news. So is every one of your fellow Christians, every believing one of them.

If today or one of the weekdays is your regular day in God's house, be ready to marvel at God's grace as you go there to hear the good news again. If tomorrow should be the day that regularly finds you in God's house, rejoice as you go there and marvel at the effect God's good news has had on you. Marvel then and marvel now! You are forgiven in Christ. You are purified by the holy blood of Jesus. Because your Savior lives, you also will live forever! From your lips at all times, in his house of prayer each week, and for endless ages in the halls of heaven, praise be to God!

When your words came, Lord, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight. Amen. (Jeremiah 15:16)

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. . . . When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" (Galatians 2:11,14)

STANDING UP MEANS STANDING AGAINST

It's good to stand up for someone who is being unjustly threatened. The seventh grader does well to defend the fourth grader who is being teased. Of course, standing up for the fourth grader means standing up against the bully. That's not easy, especially if the bully is a friend. But even friends can be wrong.

It's hard to stand up against a friend. How much harder it must be to stand up against a friend who is also an apostle of Christ! But that's just what the apostle Paul was forced to do on one occasion. His fellow apostle, Peter, was "clearly in the wrong." By his actions, Peter was threatening the very heart of the gospel of Jesus: the truth that sinners are justified—declared innocent—by God through faith alone in Christ. So Paul opposed Peter, not disrespectfully or arrogantly, but not timidly either. The truth of justification was at stake.

Martin Luther found himself in a similar situation. Like Paul, Luther saw justification threat-

ened, so he stood up for it, even though it meant standing up against powerful church leaders who, ironically, claimed Peter as the foundation of their church.

It's not that Paul or Luther enjoyed confrontation. Both would have gladly avoided it. But they knew how much was at stake. If the poison of false teaching ever seeps into the truth of justification by faith alone in Christ, then all the souls who digest it will be eternally lost!

Could your church ever fall into Peter's error? If an apostle can stray from the truth, then we all do well to take warning. The doctrine of justification is like a glass made of fine crystal, beautiful and precious, but easily broken. The church of Christ balances precariously on top of this fragile glass, which Christ has preserved intact through believers who, like Paul and Luther, have been willing to stand up for justification against those who threaten to shatter it. Christ can use you too. Stand up for justification!

Father, I thank you for empowering your saints throughout history to stand up for the truth of the gospel so that I may know and believe it. Give me strength to do the same, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Before certain men came from James, [Peter] used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. (Galatians 2:12,13)

GIVING THE DEVIL AN INCH

Some people are never happy with what they're given. They demand more and more. As the saying goes, "Give him an inch and he'll take a mile." That's especially true when it comes to the devil and the doctrine of justification.

Peter gave the devil an inch. He made a minor change in his behavior. A certain group of Jews came to town, teaching that Christians needed to obey the Old Testament law of circumcision in order to be saved. Afraid of offending them, Peter stopped associating with the uncircumcised Gentiles. He gave in to the false teachers out of fear, and his little concession quickly grew into a big problem.

Peter's small change in behavior was hypocrisy: believing that we are saved only by what Christ did, but giving the impression that believing in Christ isn't quite good enough. One man's hypocrisy led to the hypocrisy of others, including Barnabas, one of the key Christian missionaries at that time. Imagine if Barnabas had taken that false teaching to the nations! The devil had

already taken a mile. His goal was the world.

You'll find that the devil will never be satisfied with an inch when it comes to eroding the truth of Scripture. He won't stop until he reaches the core of the Christian faith, justification by faith alone in Christ. Take, for example, a small concession, like allowing the theory of evolution as the true way the world came into being. The devil will take that concession and continue, "If you can't rely on God to tell you the truth in Genesis, how do you know he's telling the truth in John, or in Romans, or in Galatians? And since you've agreed to let scientists tell you what to believe, why not believe them when they say that a virgin can't bear a child and that the dead can't rise?" The devil doesn't want an inch. He wants to take your Savior away from you!

By standing on the truth of justification by faith alone, the apostle Paul snatched the devil's mile away from him. But Satan will be back, pleading for just an inch. Don't give it to him! Stand on the truth of justification!

Lord God, the devil threatens to devour us. Defend us from his lies, that we may stand firm on your Word and cling to Christ alone. Amen.

"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified." (Galatians 2:15,16)

GOD'S NEW MATH

During the 1960s, "new math" was introduced into American schools. Some people thought that "old math" was failing to teach children the complexities of mathematics. Of course, the more complex it got, the harder it was for kids to understand. New math didn't catch on, and in 1974, Morris Kline published a book called *Why Johnny Can't Add: The Failure of the New Math*.

New math may have been a failure, but God's "new math" is the only thing that succeeds in bringing about a declaration of not guilty for guilty people like you and me.

It was the "old math" of the law that was too complicated. "Perfect love for God plus perfect love for your neighbor minus any sin whatsoever times every moment of your life equals justification." Those who were born into Judaism should have known that better than anyone. The Gentiles, who didn't have the written equation of the Old Testament law, might have fooled themselves into thinking they were good enough for God.

But God had multiplied the laws for the Jews to drive this truth home to them: "You can never be justified by keeping the law, because you can't do the math!"

Jesus, however, did do the math that the law required. So God offers to mankind a new math that does work, a new equation that's as simple as can be, taught very clearly by the apostle Paul: "Justification is by faith in Christ plus zero." Any attempt to complicate the justification equation by adding the things we do back into it ruins God's new math completely.

Isn't that comforting? You know that, according to the old math, you're guilty. Your thoughts, words, and deeds don't add up to the holiness that God requires. But according to God's new math, your thoughts, words, and deeds—whether good or bad!—never even enter into the equation. Only Christ enters. And where Christ is, there all of God's requirements are fully met. There alone is justification found for all who trust in him. That's a doctrine worth defending!

Holy Father, I praise you for declaring me not guilty by faith in your holy Son Jesus. Keep my eyes fixed on him, that I may always stand in your presence without shame. Amen.

"If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!" (Galatians 2:17)

CHRIST, OUR FAITHFUL FRIEND

Jake's dad owned a movie theater. One day Jake decided to invite his friends to see a movie. "Trust me, you don't need any money," he assured them. "My dad owns the theater. He'll let you in for free." When they arrived at the theater, Jake's dad came out to greet them. "Welcome, kids! Since you're Jake's friends, I'll let you in for half price." "Half price?" they lamented, confused. "Jake told us you'd let us in for free, so we left our money at home." "Sorry," he replied. "I'm afraid Jake misled you." Jake's friends went home disappointed. Their friend had failed them.

That's the kind of "friend" we would have in Jesus, says the apostle Paul, if justification by faith alone fails. Some people had come along insisting that faith in Christ wouldn't be enough to get into the Father's family, that certain works also had to be done. Peter had started to act as if they might be right, so Paul had to spell out for Peter the horrifying consequences of such teaching.

"Remember, Peter," Paul explained. "We left our works at home, because Jesus assured us,

'Trust me, you don't need any works for salvation. My Father welcomes you into his family because you're my friends through faith in me alone.' So here we are, believing that we'll be justified in Christ, declared righteous by his Father based solely on our relationship with Christ. But in the end, if God the Father tells us that friendship with his Son wasn't enough, that we're still guilty sinners in his eyes, then Christ has misled us. If those people are right who say we need our works in addition to Christ, then Christ falls short of saving us. He has failed us."

But is that really possible? "Absolutely not!" Paul exclaims. If anyone is promoting sin, it's not Christ but those who say he is not enough. They are the ones who make Christ out to be a liar and a failure.

We know that Christ has not failed us. We know that his blood is worth more than all of our sins and that one work of his is worth more than all of our works combined. And so we trust in him, our faithful friend, confident that his Father will gladly receive us on account of him alone.

Father, help me to rest in the worth of your Son, so that when my conscience condemns me, I may cling to your loving promise to accept me for Jesus' sake. Amen.

"If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker." (Galatians 2:18)

LET THE LAW LIE IN RUINS

The trial begins. The devil brings his charges against you. He accuses you of failing to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and of failing to love your neighbor as yourself. A single infraction of God's law would condemn you eternally. Needless to say, Satan has all the evidence he needs to convict you, to prove that you are a lawbreaker.

Except for one thing. His accusations are based on a set of laws that have been overturned. They were nailed to the cross of Christ. The book of the law may not legally enter God's courtroom, unless you, the defendant, choose to rescue it from Jesus' cross and bring it in with you.

"You've heard the charges," says the Judge. "What do you have to say?" You do not have the right to remain silent. You must answer. What will your defense be?

A group of Jews once promoted a defense among the Christians in Antioch: "We believed in Christ and obeyed the law of circumcision." But Paul shows how reckless that defense would be. "If I rebuild what I destroyed," that is, if I let the law back into God's courtroom after it was nailed to

the cross of Christ, "I prove that I am a lawbreaker." You can't pick and choose which laws to bring back into God's courtroom. If you bring circumcision back in as part of your defense, then the rest of the book of the law comes with it, condemning you for every sin you've ever committed. The whole law gets entered back into evidence, and Satan smiles.

What will your defense be? "I believed in Christ and tried to be a good parent." "I believed in Christ and kept the Ten Commandments." "I believed in Christ and did the best I could." All of those defenses point to something you have done in obedience to God's law. If that is your defense, then you have rebuilt what you destroyed. Now Satan is free to accuse, and your own defense testifies against you, because while you may have kept some laws, you broke many others.

What is the only defense that results in an innocent verdict from the Judge? "Christ!" If Christ alone is your defense, then Satan has no case against you. He has lost, and you are justified. Satan hates to lose, so he will tempt you to trust again in your works. Don't fall for it. Let the law lie in ruins!

Lord Jesus, now and in my dying hour, be my only defense and comfort. Amen.

"For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:19,20)

AN IDENTITY EXCHANGE

Identity theft is a terrible crime. Someone steals your identity and then breaks laws and racks up credit card debt. The law comes looking for you, all for what someone else did in your name.

It wasn't identity theft that took place between Christ and us. It was more like an identity exchange. We had a criminal record before God. Our name was ruined by our own doing. There was a warrant out for our arrest, and death and hell were our inevitable sentence.

Then, moved by his great compassion, Christ came along and said, "Here's what we're going to do. We're going to exchange identities. I will take your name, and I will give you mine. I'll take your criminal record on myself, and you can have my clean record. I will be declared guilty, and you will be declared innocent. I'll even die under your name, so that you may live under mine. Okay?" And faith, kindled by his

kindness, breathed a sigh of relief, "Okay."

The law threatens death for the sinner. But now, because of our identity exchange with Christ, we can truly say that we sinners have died to the law. It has nothing more to say to us, either good or bad, because Christ took on our sinner identity and was crucified.

Now Christ lives in us. He has given us his identity, the identity of the holy and sinless Son of God. We no longer go by the name of sinner, as far as our identity before God is concerned. We go by the name of Christ.

In a human legal system, that would be called fraud. In God's courtroom, it's called grace. We can't understand why Christ would want to exchange identities with us. But we can praise and thank him for it by standing firm on the doctrine of justification "by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us." Let Luther's prayer be yours:

Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not. Amen.

(Prayer from *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 48, p. 12.)

"... I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (Galatians 2:20,21)

AN ALL-OR-NOTHING SAVIOR

Could you ever imagine someone calling Jesus their *almost* Savior? It's hard to believe anyone could say such a thing, but that's the false teaching the apostle Paul is opposing in Galatians. "Jesus did almost all of the work of getting us declared righteous before God," the false teachers claimed. "But we still have to keep a little bit of God's law."

"If a person could keep God's law," Paul replied, "Christ died for nothing!" Why? Because there's no such thing as "keeping a little bit" of God's law. The law is all or nothing.

God's law is like a balloon. One prick of a needle—one sin—pops the balloon, and it's suddenly good for nothing. If people could live their whole lives without sinning, they wouldn't need a Savior at all. Christ would have died for nothing. But no one can keep from popping the balloon of God's law, because from the moment we're conceived, our souls are like porcupines.

What we needed was a substitute, someone who could keep the law in our place without ever pop-

ping the balloon. When Paul says that the Son of God "loved me and gave himself for me," that's what he means. Christ is not our assistant when it comes to justification, but our substitute. As our substitute, Christ had to give all of himself, including his very last breath and his very last drop of blood. He didn't die for nothing. We were "dead in transgressions and sins," as Paul says in Ephesians 2:1, so Christ had to go all the way to death in order to meet us and bring us to life.

Most of the people in the world still don't know Christ as their substitute. At best, they think of him as their *almost* Savior. But you know the truth. You know him as your complete Savior, whose death didn't contribute to your justification, but accomplished it. You know that because long ago the apostle Paul stood up for justification. You can stand up for justification too by telling others how we are forgiven and accepted by God. It has nothing at all to do with what we do. It has everything to do with our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Lord Jesus Christ, my Savior, by your death, you have rescued me from death; and by your life, you have brought me to life. Use me to bring your saving truth to others. Amen.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. (Galatians 3:23)

JAILED! RELEASED!

Bang! The door swung shut behind us. Deadbolts slid into place. It wasn't a true jail cell with iron barred windows and icy cement floors, but it felt as bad. What had we done to deserve confinement? We hadn't stolen, murdered, or spoken against the government; hadn't even run a red light! Our visa ran out before we could leave the country. In some ways it wasn't even our fault. But the communist authorities in East Germany didn't care. Jailed for who knows how long! Jailed for such a small infraction! Jailed until all was satisfied! Thank God, it didn't last long!

Confinement is not a happy thing. Did your parents ever ground you? Did the teacher ever restrict you from recess? Was your driver's license ever revoked? Jailed! Maybe it wasn't that bad. Nevertheless, you were restricted for your infraction. That's hard to endure. The hope is that such restrictions are temporary.

So it was for God's Old Testament people. His laws restricted them, governing their worship, their dress, their conduct, their relationships, even their diet. The Law of Moses went on and on. It hemmed them in, imprisoned them,

locked them up, burdened their lives. And the worst part? They still sinned and failed to keep it. Fail to keep the law, and it jails you.

It's what the law does; that's one of its purposes, no matter how small the infraction might be, "For whoever . . . stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10); and "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law" (Galatians 3:10). Have you kept God's law perfectly? No? Bang! Do you hear the door clang shut behind you too? Jailed, just like the people of Israel.

But God has promised a Savior to release us from sin and the weight of the law. So the restriction ends, the burden lifts, and the Savior carries our load. Released, for "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4).

By faith you know him. He's the One who invites, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest . . . for your souls" (Matthew 11:28,29).

Jailed by the law for sin's infractions! But it didn't last. The Savior came to release us. Free! Free! Thank God, Christ freed me!

Merciful God, when my sin and the burden of the law oppress me, release me in Christ. Give me faith to find my rest in him. Amen.

So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:24)

SUPERVISED FOR A TIME TILL ALL BECAME CLEAR

6:00 A.M. A shrill whistle pierced the dawn. Time to rise. Soon a Dutchman arrived to usher us from our beds to the factory where we worked. Not knowing a lick of Dutch, we depended on him to direct us where to go, what to do, and how to get the work done. After all, we'd never lived and worked in a tulip factory before! What does one do in such a place? We were neophytes needing guidance, direction, even protection until all became clear to us. We required supervision for a time.

When Paul writes, "The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ," he describes the law's supervisory role. It told the Israelite what God expected in worship, dress, conduct, relationships, and diet. Israel was special to him, for from this nation the Savior would come. The Law of Moses supervised them for a time until Christ would come and the promised salvation would be made clear.

But tell me, who likes such minute supervision? What grade school boy loves a tutor who sets him down and instructs him in every detail of conduct and learning? Then the tutor requires per-

fection as though the boy held a doctoral degree! Can he do it? Even if the boy wanted to, he couldn't fulfill tasks beyond him. Still, a tutor is necessary to instruct, guide, and direct. Without supervision the boy would learn nothing and come to complete ruin.

The Law of Moses was a temporary supervisor, a guardian, a tutor that guided Old Testament Israel for a time. The lessons taught were necessary. Without them Israel would come to ruin. But the demands were humanly impossible; and the restrictions, suffocating.

Dear friends, we couldn't have kept them either. Thank God that he brought us to himself another way—through Christ, who could do everything for us who were suffocating under the law. "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law" (Galatians 4:4,5). Salvation before God is made clear in him by believing he did it.

Supervised for a time till all became clear, we are saved by Christ. Free! Free! Thank God, Christ freed me!

O God, the burden of sin suffocates me daily. I am weak and overwhelmed by your holy demands. Thank you for sending Christ to free me. Lead me to him in faith daily, that I find my life with you in him in time and eternity. Amen.

Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. (Galatians 3:25)

FAITH'S TIME HAS COME

When I was 5, I wished I was 10.
When I was 14, I wished I was 18.
When I was 18, I wished I was 22.
It always seemed to go like that.

Now that I've finally grown up and realize more fully the blessings of life God gives me, I'm content. I'm even more content when I think back to the limitations that restricted me in my youthful years. Youth has its advantages, but you can't beat maturity!

Doesn't Paul reflect that, in 1 Corinthians 13:11: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me"?

Sure, there are responsibilities now; sure, there are problems; sure, there are demands; sure, everything isn't rosy all the time. But I still don't want to go back to where I was some 30 years ago. God has opened life to me in wondrous ways that I never dreamed of then. By his grace my time of adulthood, growth, and blessing has come. This is the time for which I once longed. Why would I go back to a time of immaturity, when I was limited in abilities and blessings and when many things were beyond my grasp?

Some of the Galatians were looking backward. They were looking to the time when they had been under the supervision of the Law of Moses. They had forgotten how much it locked them up and held them prisoners (verse 23). Imprisoned! It limited, suffocated, and enslaved them. During that time, they longed for the Savior to come and free them from the curse of the law (verse 10).

Then Christ came and freed them, fulfilling all of the law's demands and paying the price with his blood for their transgressions against God. Redemption was theirs by faith, which trusted that God's promise was now fulfilled. Why would anyone want to go back to the time of immaturity and restriction under the law? The law enslaves and cannot save; faith in the Savior sets one free. That time of faith has come. Free! It is done. What a blessing!

In looking at the past, some people say "Those were the good ol' days." Are the good old days really in the past? Since Christ's atoning work is done, the "good ol' days" are *now*!

Christ arrived. Faith's time has come. We are free!

O Christ, you came and freed me from the law's oppressive supervision. Help me live each day in faith and enjoy today's blessings. Amen.

You are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26)

I'M A SON!

Sometimes our feelings can be like those of a man lying in a hospital, recuperating from a serious fall. He has a broken spine. The break is so severe that it will take time to mend. After awhile it seems to him like he's getting no better.

Weeks turn into months. Finally the day comes for the doctor to remove the cast. When he does, the man can still do nothing. Months of therapy, exercise, and treatments pass, but he can do no better than to move his leg just a bit. He thinks he'll never walk again and sinks into despondency.

One day a friend asks how he's feeling. A great tide of sad emotions rush out. He's of no importance to anyone and worthless to everyone. He ends the conversation saying, "I wish I could die." It's an overstatement of despair.

Sometimes our feelings are similar. Have you never felt despondent, as though you're of little importance to anyone? Even Paul expressed a moment of despondency when he cried, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). Sin and its consequences can so over-

whelmed and break us that we function no better than an injured man lying in distress in a hospital. How can anyone, let alone God, care?

But here is our faith in the gospel. Feelings don't dictate worth; God's gracious promises do. The Lord Jesus assures us: "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2). "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine . . . I will be with you . . . and . . . the rivers . . . will not sweep over you" (Isaiah 43:1,2).

Broken, worthless, despondent, lying helpless before God—true! That's where I was under the law in sin. But Christ mended, enriched, and lifted me out of the devil's grasp to be called God's own. I'm a son! No matter my ancestry, I'm no outcast, no stranger, no vagabond to God, but a son! How great the Father's love for us, that we should be called his children (1 John 3:1)!

Freed from sin, adopted into the family, receiving full rights as sons—thank God! In faith no river of despair can sweep me away, for Christ makes me worthy to God. I am a son!

Lord, how great is your love. In Christ, you made me your child. Free me from the despondency of sin and grant me faith that clings to your promises. I am yours. Keep me safe for Jesus' sake. Amen.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Galatians 3:26,27)

CHRIST COVERS ME

Down my back runs a scar, a memento from my brother when we were kids. One day we were playing hide-and-seek at Grandma's house. I was little more than five and didn't have many wits about me. I heard him call, "Ready or not, here I come!" But I hadn't found a place to hide. The nearest thing was Grandma's clothesline pole—in the middle of the yard. So I climbed to the top and sat on the crossbar.

How ridiculous a spot! My brother ran around the corner, saw me immediately, and grabbed my legs. Down I came, getting caught on the end of the clothesline wire. For a time I was self-conscious about the "railroad track" that ran down my back. Thank goodness my clothes usually covered it. Over time it has faded to the point where people can't see it anymore.

You've got a similar thing that mars your appearance. It's bigger than a scar running down your back. It covers every inch of you, affecting even your heart. Its marking is grotesque, torn more every time you yield to temptation. It's called sin. So horrible is its appearance to God that David

prayed, "Hide your face from my sins" (Psalm 51:9).

But God did more than hide his face. Just hiding his face wouldn't do. God's justice required more. He covered us in the blood and righteousness of Christ so that the scars of sin are seen no more. Now when God looks at us in Christ, he sees only the Savior's righteous robes.

I know that he did that for me at my baptism. There he went to work, covering the grotesque sinful nature with which I was born. I passively received what he actively gave—a robe of righteousness. He called me into his family through Christ, made me his son, and even gave me the faith I needed to believe in him. It all is a matter of grace, given through divine promises, "For all of you who were been baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ." It's God's amazing grace—his doing, not mine.

Now Christ covers me. I wear the royal robes given to me by my heavenly Father. He can't see my scars anymore. In Christ they are gone forever. Thank God, he healed me from them!

Jesus, your blood and righteousness richly clothe me. Grant me a joyful spirit to wear them daily with heavenly pride as I live for you. Amen.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

$$[(1 + 1) \times 3] + 1 = 1$$

Last night our daughter came to us with a math problem: "If you have minus 18 and you add 18, do you get zero?" I shook my head in wonderment. "Isn't that rather obvious?" I thought. Because of experience, I had already worked out an answer. But she was stuck on the problem caused by the word *add*. Normally, if you add numbers together, you have more than you started with. It seemed to her that the answer should be higher than zero if she was adding numbers together.

How about this equation: $[(1 + 1) \times 3] + 1 = 1$. Right or wrong? Normally, if you complete this equation, you end with more than you started. But that's not true when Christ is part of the equation. Paul writes, "Just as each of you has one body with many members . . . so in Christ we who are many form one body" (Romans 12:4,5). Christ draws together individuals and combines them into one in him.

Our reading says it this way: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (think of that as the $[1 + 1] \times 3$), for you are all one in Christ (+ 1)." $[(1 + 1) \times 3] + 1 = 1$. The point is this:

if together we are found in Christ, we are one, for there is only one in whom we have our being—Christ.

In the previous devotions, Paul made the point that all the laws governing Israel's worship, dress, conduct, relationships, and diet could not save them. They only imprisoned them. Likewise, all the laws, wise works, righteous acts, worship, obedience, and honorable deeds carried out by the Gentiles did nothing for them in God's sight. No human effort carried out in obedience to the law can save anyone before God. Then what does? Only faith in Christ's atoning blood!

Oh, surely, God has many laws, roles, responsibilities, styles, and forms of worship to be carried out in the world. But keeping them does not earn us status or draw us closer to him; neither can any of them take away sin and deliver from death. Laws and roles and forms can't do that. They help us discover sin, but can't get rid of it. Christ does! He alone makes us one with God and one in God with each other. $(1 + 1) \times n = 1$!

These are magnificent and glorious words! Together set free by faith to be one in Christ!

God of salvation, help me take my place in you through Jesus' merits. Grant faith to my friends, me, and all so that Christ may live and work in us and we may become one in him. Amen.

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:29)

CHRIST, I'M YOURS!

Every time I see it, it sends chills through me—not bad ones, but happy ones filled with meaning. It's a scene that comes in the movie *Luther*. It happens twice. The first time Martin Luther is in the monastery struggling with sin. His conscience and Satan oppress him with guilt. Try as he might, he cannot escape them to find peace with God. In a dark monk's cell, he lies prone on the floor, arms stretched out in the form of a cross. Face to the floor, he can barely be heard to whisper, "I'm yours; save me."

The second time he's seen in that position several years have passed. The peace within is realized as the gospel takes hold of his heart. This time a different enemy confronts and oppresses him. He's at the Diet of Worms, where the authorities seek to destroy his writings and make him denounce his faith. Peace with God through the restoration of gospel truths, and evil men want to destroy it! The night before he must stand against them, he again lies face to the floor and whispers, "I'm yours; save me."

Every time I watch those scenes, they go through me, not

the setting but the words. It's as if they came from me: "I'm yours; save me!"

That we should be God's own! That we should belong to him! Is it possible? I'm not Jewish. I don't belong to the people descended from Abraham, neither did the Galatians. They did not have the Law of Moses or the trappings of Judaism in their background. Yet what does Paul tell them? "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. . . . If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Baptized into Christ, clothed with him, believing in him makes me God's son. I belong to him, not because of kinship through blood or by possession of the law but through trust in God's promise that a Savior covers my sin through his atoning work. "To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12): Yes, even more than children—heirs of heaven! Christ, I'm yours!

Lord, when doubts assail and enemies oppress my faith, let me cling to Christ alone. In him I'm yours, freed for eternity. Increase my faith and give me a grateful heart to proclaim this gospel to all. Amen.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

STAND FIRM!

"Meet me at the flagpole!" It is a 4th of July tradition. After the marching band, the flag-waving citizens, the home-grown floats, the antique autos and roaring motorcycles, we meet at the community flagpole. We listen to a reading from the Declaration of Independence or perhaps the Bill of Rights. We hear the words of our Founding Fathers that remind us we are all created equal and with inalienable rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

"Meet me at the flagpole!" directs our thoughts to the initial reasons that many came to this country! People from many countries have come here because of oppression and persecution. They've come here to make a new life in a place where they really are free. Such gatherings are a time to recommit to upholding the gift of freedom. It was paid for by the bravery, the blood, and the tears of our men and women in the military. Meet me at the flagpole to remember and never forget their sacrifice.

"Meet me at the cross!" the apostle Paul is saying when he talks about the freedom that

Christ has won for us. Every Sunday our eyes and hearts are drawn to the cross of Christ. The price for our freedom from sin's chains, death's icy grasp, and the devil's prison was not cheap. It required the perfect obedience of Jesus to the Father's will. It demanded his lifeblood. Can we forget what Jesus has done for our spiritual freedom? Can we forget how Jesus led the devil in chains on parade through the streets of hell? Can we forget how he broke death's bonds when he rose bodily from the dead?

There are times when I forget. I forget when the devil replays for me the sins I have committed. I forget when the troubles of this life overwhelm me like a tsunami that rushes in, drags me down under, and washes me away. I cry "Woe is me!" instead of "Jesus, save me!" I forget when my own life's successes shift my attention from the cross of Christ to the medals of my accomplishments. Jesus, forgive me for forgetting!

"Meet me at the cross!" is not a yearly reminder for us but a daily reminder of sins forgiven, renewed life today, and eternal life with him in heaven.

Heavenly Father, protect those who are fighting for our freedom. Help us never forget the freedom that Jesus has won for us and the gift of heaven that is waiting. Amen.

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:13,14)

SERVE IN LOVE

It was a special day. Eagles are meant to soar, and a rescued eagle with a broken wing was ready to be set free. Those who had tenderly nurtured it back to health were nervous. Would it be able to remember how to fly? Had the wing mended itself? Would this eagle be able to survive once more in the wild?

We Christians are meant to soar in our faith. But how often are we unable to get off the ground when it comes to loving service to our neighbor? What are the sorts of things that weigh us down, break our spiritual wings, and rob us of soaring? The apostle Paul puts his finger on it when he reminds us, "But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Instead of loving our neighbor, we cater to the sinful nature. Our wants take first priority. That sinful attitude weighs us down. It breaks our wings. We fail to soar, because we fail to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Heavenly Father, in the freedom you have given us help us soar as on wings of eagles as we love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.

We sin. (God, be merciful to me a sinner!)

Our neighbor may need our loving ear. Our elderly neighbor may need our time to help shop, run errands, or even sit with him or her. Our young neighbor may need mentoring to get through the treacherous reefs of youth. He or she needs your help to become a responsible adult who can weather the storms and the wild oceans in the world.

How can we soar again? Paul reminds us of our spiritual roots, "You, my brothers, were called to be free." God is responsible for our soaring spiritually in the first place! He is the one who tenderly and lovingly cares for us. He has forgiven our sins in Jesus. The broken wings are healed by the blood of Jesus. His perfect life lifts the weight off our burdened wings.

The cage was opened, and for a moment the eagle didn't seem to comprehend what was happening. But then, with wings now healed, it began to fly. Catching a thermal, it soared out of sight. Eagles are meant to soar, and so are Christians.

If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. (Galatians 5:15-18)

LIVE IN HARMONY

The trip was too long. We didn't have any personal play stations or DVD players for the kids. In fact, the "I spy" game had long ago played itself out. The old Rambler station wagon had no air conditioning, and the irritation level had reached a crescendo. The kids in the back-seat began to pick at each other. The battle was on until Dad exploded, "Do I have to stop the car?" Silence once again reigned—for a while!

What an apt description of how our sinful nature and the new self battle it out. Relative peace may exist, but it is a troubled cease-fire with no real hope of lasting peace. Even the apostle Paul had this ongoing battle in his heart. He writes, "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that

you do not do what you want." There is not a morning when we wake up that we do not have this battle going on inside us. The sinful nature tempts us with everything under the sun that is contrary to what the Holy Spirit desires for us. Finally, it is the Father in heaven who explodes at us with his law, "Stop!" On our own we can't stop, but thanks be to Jesus, who has brought us into harmony with the Father.

Jesus steps in between the Father and us. Jesus kept the law perfectly for us. He gives us his perfect record and has paid for our sin on the cross. The law still acts as an X ray revealing our sin-broken lives, but it can't fix them. Only Jesus could do that. We are not under law anymore, so don't stoop to the sinful nature's temptations. By the Spirit's power, live, love, and follow his lead found in his Word.

Heavenly Father, help us as we daily battle the sinful nature. Strengthen us by your almighty power. Comfort us with the promise of forgiveness through your Son, Jesus, and lead us by your Holy Spirit. Amen.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

REMEMBER!

A popular television program asks the question, "Are you smarter than a fifth grader?" It implies that most adults are not able to match the wits or knowledge of a fifth-grade class. Someone has made the observation that the older we get the further away we are from the simple truths we learned in fifth grade.

What is true about that television program is also true about our spiritual knowledge. Over time the simple truths we learned in catechism class may become a bit foggy. The world's view of what is right and wrong slowly but surely seeps into our thinking. Paul lists these sins because we need to be reminded that they really are sins. The world's acceptance of many of these as not being sin is seen in the way that it labels them. Sexual immorality is labeled a "lifestyle choice." Idolatry and witchcraft are looked upon as "alternative religions." Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition are just a way of expressing oneself!

When it comes to this list of sins, we need to go back to what we learned in God's Word. It is very clear when we hear God say, "You shall/shall not!" This is not a checklist where we mark the ones we have fallen for and get scored on what we've done right. This is serious: "I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." Those words chill our hearts, because if we were to have a spiritual DNA test, we would be reminded that we are all the sons and daughters of . . . sinners.

There seems to be no hope for any of us! Like the apostle we confess, "What a wretched [person] I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24,25). Jesus scores a perfect 100 percent for me. His blood cleanses me from all sin. May the Holy Spirit renew in us the simple truths we learned as spiritual fifth graders, so we can see with clarity God's will for us. May we be compelled by Jesus' love to follow him.

Heavenly Father, help us! You have adopted us to be your own. Help us give you glory with our lives. In Jesus' name, we ask this. Amen.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22,23)

NO LAW!

The box was carefully wrapped with lots of packing tape so it would not open. When it was opened, the aroma of fresh fruit wafted through the house. I mean the smell of real, ripe fruit and vegetables. Fragrant peaches, nectarines, Asian pears, and even bright red tomatoes and fresh sweet corn. Each item was carefully wrapped and cushioned to protect it during its long flight to our destination. Talk about a treasure! You see, we live in a place where truly fresh fruit is rare. It may sound silly, but I am thankful that there is no law against bringing fresh fruit into our state!

I am equally thankful that there is no law against the fruit of the Spirit. Have you ever heard anyone say, "Don't be so loving?" Or "Do you have to be so joyful or full of peace or patient?" Or "Can you be a little less kind, good, or faithful?" No, in fact, you probably see people stop and take notice when you do exhibit the fruit of the Spirit.

It may seem strange, but you may live in a city where the fresh fruit of the Spirit is rare. It is

unusual because it can only be grown in hearts where the Holy Spirit is working through the gospel in Word and sacrament. Too often we view the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit. We see hate, sorrow, war, impatience, bad actions, unfaithful people, and those who are out of control just to mention a few! The apostle Paul lists many sins in previous verses that are all too common in our world. People get such a steady diet of this kind of "fruit" that they may forget just how precious the real thing is! We too may exhibit those sins from time to time, because the old self is still working in our hearts. Jesus forgive us.

Through the all-powerful gospel in Word and sacrament our dead, sinful hearts were plowed, fertilized, watered, and now produce the best of fruit. It is the fruit that the world needs to see. It is the aroma of life that the world needs to smell and the taste of eternal life that comes only from Jesus. Continue to feed your faith by hearing and learning the Word. I am thankful that there is no law against that.

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Holy Spirit to create life in my heart. Bless his work with fruit that gives you glory. Amen.

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:24)

WE BELONG TO HIM!

I can still remember getting ready for my first year away at school in ninth grade. My mom had her indelible marker and was making sure that each item of clothing had my initials printed somewhere, so that if anyone found a lost item they would know beyond the shadow of a doubt to whom it belonged. My dad, on the other hand, seemed to have little advice except these words: "Son, just don't ever forget to whom you belong."

I believe at the time I didn't quite understand what he meant. I suppose I thought he meant "Don't bring shame on the family name" or "I had better not get a phone call from the dean of students!" But as the years have passed, I believe I now fully understand that he was talking about my relation to Jesus—never forgetting that I am his blood-bought brother and consequently the heavenly Father's child.

The apostle Paul reminded his readers of the same thing. Here is his indelible marker: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires." The apostle Paul lived in a world that was

filled with sights and sounds that invited believers to sin and forget that they belonged to Jesus. Times have not changed. We cannot turn on the TV, rent a DVD, get on the Internet, or read a magazine and not receive the same types of temptations to forget to whom we belong.

In the course of daily living, we can get all sorts of sins that stick on us. The devil uses these sins to try to convince us that we belong to him and not to Jesus. Don't forget how Jesus put his mark on us. He received the ultimate, permanent marks when he endured the nails through his hands and feet, the piercing of the crown of thorns, the marks of the whip tipped with bone and metal. At the end of the day when our robe of righteousness is soiled by the sin of the day, we need the reassurance that the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from all sins. We need to hear his promise that he has created us, formed us, and called us by name in Baptism. We belong to him.

Today hear his voice as he reminds us, "Son, daughter, don't forget to whom you belong."

Dear Jesus, thank you for taking my sin and giving me your righteousness. Thank you for making me yours. Help me live for you today. Amen.

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:25)

KEEP IN STEP!

"Your left! Your left! Your left, right, left!" There is a beauty to the marching cadence of a platoon. However, it doesn't come naturally to most. It takes discipline to march in step, and some never seem to do it right. But when it is done right, it makes you proud. The trumpet call, the bark of the sergeant, the cadence call all make perfect sense so that a person doesn't even think about the "right face, left face" commands, they just follow them.

The apostle Paul's contact with Roman soldiers during his years in prison gave him a very special window into their world. I have no doubt that when the Holy Spirit caused him to write this he smiled and nodded his head. Yes, he had seen this many times, and it really did fit with the life of a Christian.

"Since," he reminds us that it is an established fact, "we live by the Spirit." He doesn't say, "We might live by the Spirit." Martin Luther in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed reminds us that "the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his

gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

But we may feel like the little boy whose short legs just can't keep up with his father whose stride is much longer. We cry out, "Wait for me!" as we fall behind. We may also continue to fall into all kinds of sins that discourage us. That is when we need to go back to God's promise: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit to remind us that our sins are forgiven and heaven is waiting. His Holy Spirit is here to help us march through this life into heaven.

As we practice marching with the Spirit, the stumbles, the mis-cues, the wrong turns start to disappear. As we listen to the Word and as we learn to walk in the Word, our focus on his cadence, his commands, his direction brings us into step. It doesn't happen overnight; in fact, it is a life-long process. There can never come a time, short of heaven, when we can stop practicing marching in step with the Spirit. "Your left! Your left! Your left, right, left!" right into heaven!

Jesus, you have freed me from sin, death, and the devil. Thank you for sending your Spirit to help me walk with you to heaven. Amen.

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2)

CARRY EACH OTHER'S BURDENS

Roe Wilkerson wrote an article in the September 1924 *Kiwanis* magazine, about an inspiring encounter he had with "a spindly and physically weak lad." He was carrying a baby and "staggering towards a neighboring park. 'Pretty big load for such a small kid' I said as I met him. 'Why, mister,' he smiled, 'He ain't heavy, he's my brother.'" Someone picked up the line and drew a cartoon of two boys, the older carrying the younger, for the 1941 Christmas *Ideals* magazine. The administrator for Boys Town in Omaha, Nebraska, saw it, had a statue commissioned, and it serves as the motto for their work to this day. It became the most famous as a hit song in 1969. The line is a catchy way of describing what the Lord commands in our passage for today. What will that thought be for you? a nice-sounding phrase or the way to live your Christian life?

"Carry each other's burdens," says Paul. A burden is like a huge boulder weighing you down as you stagger along the highway of life. What are some things that can be such a crushing weight? The list is long: sickness, sudden tragedy,

financial difficulty, broken dreams, failed marriage, troubled children, career setbacks, or the death of a loved one. How wonderful when there is someone to share those problems, help you through them, or just hear you out.

You are familiar with support groups: grief groups, single moms, divorce groups, groups to handle addictions. Support groups help people share with one another their mutual struggles and burdens. The best support group of all is one that we sometimes take for granted: our Christian congregations. Are you willing to carry some of those burdens for your brothers and sisters in the faith? There is an old Swedish proverb that says: "Shared joys are double joys; shared sorrows are half a sorrow."

Paul encourages us: "In this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Jesus said it this way: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). Christ's love means his sacrifice to pay for all of our sins. His love inspires our Christian life, much more than a catchy phrase!

**May we your precepts, Lord, fulfill
And do on earth our Father's will
As angels do above,
Still walk in Christ, the living way,
With all your children, and obey
The law of Christian love. Amen. (CW 458:1)**

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1,2)

SHARING THE BURDEN OF SIN

Suppose someone has wrecked his car in front of your house, and he is lying on your grass, unconscious and bleeding to death. Would you ignore him and hope that someone else will show up? Of course not! You would call 9-1-1 and then do whatever you could to help.

Now suppose that someone is making a car wreck of his faith and is bleeding to death spiritually. He might even be unconscious of it. Do we ignore him and hope the problem goes away? That person could die, eternally separated from God!

Who is Paul talking about? He is talking about fellow Christians who are "caught in a sin." This means that they are entrapped by it. They have lost the power or desire to resist. They might be in a state of denial, wrongly thinking that their actions really aren't sins at all. Perhaps it's sexual relations without marriage or an addiction to drugs or alcohol. It could be as commonplace as ignoring God and his Word.

It's not easy to approach a straying brother or sister. You

can expect rejection or hurt feelings. Perhaps he won't talk to you anymore. Perhaps she'll accuse you of meddling in her life. But is it meddling to warn someone of the danger he or she is in? If you were a doctor and knew that your patient had to stop drinking or he would be dead in less than a year, would you decide not to tell him about it?

Paul gives us the goal: "Restore him gently." *Restore* means "to return something to the way it was." The word was used for repairing fishing nets or setting a fractured bone. The Lord wants us to do whatever we can to restore those whose relationship with Christ has been fractured and broken. It needs to be reset and healed.

How important it is to do this gently! It does no good to be arrogant about it: "Oh, you poor sinner, you better get your life right like mine." That's why we confess together that we all are poor sinful beings and deserving of God's wrath. Together we go to the cross and see the burdens Jesus carried for us all.

Lord Jesus, you have restored each of us by your grace. Guide us to aid one another in laying our burdens of sin at your cross. Amen.

If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load. (Galatians 6:3-5)

SHARING BURDENS WITH CHRISTIAN HUMILITY

We have heard the apostle Paul encourage us to help Christians who are weaker than we are. There is something else we need to hear from God's Word: the warning against sinful pride that would lead us to compare ourselves to those who are weaker and to think that we are better than they are. Paul provides that warning: "If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself." By ourselves we are all equally condemned sinners, all equally deserving of his punishment. All Christians—whether we are weak or strong in our faith—are children of God only because of God's undeserved grace to us in Christ. We have God's love and approval only because of what Jesus did for us. He lived and died for everyone equally to win God's forgiveness for us equally. So there should be no room in our hearts for sinful pride and comparing ourselves to those who may be struggling with spiritual weaknesses.

Paul reminds us that the only thing we are to compare ourselves

with is the requirements of God's holy law for all of us. On judgment day we will have to give an account of ourselves before a holy and righteous God, not before Christians who were weaker than we were. As Paul said to the Romans, "Each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). That is what Paul is talking about when he says, "Each one should test his own actions" and "each one should carry his own load."

As we strive to help other Christians who are weak and struggling in their faith, we need to keep focused, not on how we compare with them but on how we compare with God's holy will for us all. What makes us humble and sympathetic towards others is the realization that we ourselves amount to so little. We have nothing to boast of before God. Each one of us has failed when it comes to God's standard of perfection. How thankful we are that in Christ all of us have a Savior from our sins. In his cross alone do we take pride and boast.

Lord Jesus, may I never boast except in your cross. Keep me humble that I may be ready to serve others. Amen.

Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. (Galatians 6:6,7)

YOU HELP LIFT THE BURDEN OF MINISTRY

I was a young vicar, visiting one of our older members. Our congregation was in the middle of its annual stewardship emphasis, and that obviously was on his mind. He was upset about the talk of money and offerings, because "Jesus said: 'You shall not use my name, for profit or for gain.'" I gently tried to point out to him that perhaps his little poem had some truth in it, but we weren't trying to make any profit or gain, just support the work of the Lord. Besides Jesus never actually said that, but he did say, "The worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7). However, our misguided member insisted that "those words are in there somewhere," motioning to the Bible in my hand, and we were definitely disobeying Jesus by talking about money.

For all too many, the giving of offerings is far too sensitive a topic. It is interesting to note that immediately after Paul instructs believers to share all good things with their instructors, he says: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." When people protest about

money in church, what is the motive? You can't fool God. He knows the heart of everyone, whether that person is speaking from guilt or greed.

A man reaps what he sows. Sow discontent, and you will reap more sorrow. Sow good gifts for called workers, and you will reap a blessing! We can receive nothing better in life than the gifts the Lord bestows on us through his Word. Through Word and sacrament, our called workers bring refreshment to our souls. When they strike our consciences with the law, they also provide the healing gospel balm of forgiveness in Christ.

In return, there are many good things we want to share with our pastors and teachers, not just financial support. We want to give them our love and respect. When is the last time you prayed for the called workers in your congregation? Have you given them any words of encouragement lately? How uplifting it is for your spiritual leaders to know that you are lifting them up before the Lord! You really do help share the burdens of ministry.

Good Shepherd, bless the shepherds you have called to feed your lambs and sheep. Guide them as they teach your Word. Help us encourage them in all that they do for you. Amen.

A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Galatians 6:7-10)

THE BURDEN OF DOING GOOD

Today Paul shares with us some common sense from the world of agriculture. You don't sow wheat and expect to harvest soy beans. A man reaps what he sows. That's a spiritual principle as well. Sow to please your sinful nature, and you can expect a life filled with tears and a harvest of eternal ruin. Sow to please the Spirit, and you can expect a life filled with blessing and a harvest of eternal joy!

Paul now applies that principle to our life of service for others, especially our church family. He thought it necessary to caution us against becoming weary, because doing good for others can become a heavy burden. We get tired out and burned out. Often it seems that people don't appreciate our efforts for them. Then we are tempted to live just for ourselves.

So, what are you sowing for your spouse or close family member? Seeds of criticism or neglect? Don't be surprised if those seeds produce a harvest of thorns and bitterness. Are you sowing encour-

agement, praise, and attention? The harvest of those seeds is love.

What are you sowing in your children's lives? What kind of example are you setting? You'll be surprised at how they learn to sow and reap exactly like you!

What are you sowing in the lives of your fellow believers? Are you moved by the sure hope of eternal life bought by the blood of Christ? Is it "I'll help you next month when I'm not so busy!" or "Let me watch your kids while you visit the doctor. Then I'll bring over dinner"?

Despite all our efforts, things still go wrong. That's why Paul spoke about reaping a harvest "at the proper time." Sometimes the harvest doesn't come when we desire. Sometimes not in this life at all. We might have to wait to hear "Well done, good and faithful servant! . . . Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:21). Thank the Lord that we will indeed hear those words, not because we deserve it but because of his grace!

Lord, help us sow the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—that we may reap your blessing! Amen.

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14)

JESUS CARRIED THE REAL BURDEN: THE CROSS

The cover of the little spiral-bound book says it all: "Grandma's Brag Book." Inside are the pictures of the little darlings she'd like to share with the world. It's a good thing when we hand out compliments and "brag" about others. It becomes a problem when you do it about yourself. Who is the subject of your bragging?

Paul once gloried in himself and his deeds. In his letters, he recounts how he "had it made" in the eyes of the world, when he was a zealous Pharisee. But then Jesus knocked him to the ground and came into his life. Nothing was ever the same. "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (Philippians 3:8). There was nothing left to boast about "except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." The cross changed Paul's life.

Some people wear a cross around their necks because they think it's a cool thing to do. But when you sincerely see the cross of Christ, it's a humbling event. We see Jesus, as he took the burden we deserved. He bore the

heavy weight of all our sins. He was being forsaken by God the Father, because "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). There was no sharing of the burden there. Only Christ could bear that awful punishment for us.

That changes everything. We can say with Paul: "The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." From our viewpoint, the old sinful world has been put to death. We don't want to have anything to do with it. The opposite is also true. From the world's viewpoint, we have been put to death too. The world doesn't want to have anything to do with us either. But that's okay, because this corrupt world only wants to bring more burdens of sin and trouble into our lives anyway.

Instead, our burden-bearer says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). So we boast about the cross of Christ to everyone! Open up the Bible for others to see. It's your "brag book" about your perfect brother, who took the burden of sin for the whole world!

Dear Lord Jesus, Increase our faith that we may never boast about ourselves. Guide us to glory only in your cross. Amen.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God. (Galatians 6:15,16)

THE BURDEN IS LIFTED FOR ALL

"Let there be light." That was the start of God's spoken word of creation. By the power of his Word, he made something out of nothing. When he was all done, it was very good! Perfect! But it didn't take very long for mankind to wreck that goodness. We've had to deal with sin and death ever since.

That didn't stop the Lord. We are a new creation! Through the spoken word of the gospel, the Lord has made us new. The Holy Spirit, through the Word and the water of Baptism, has given us a new birth and new life! "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The dead weight of our sin is gone!

The outward ceremonies of the Old Testament, such as circumcision, are but a fading memory. Who would ever want to go back to the telegraph when you have the Internet and cell phones around the globe? We are the new creation by the new covenant in Christ! That's what the new "rule," or principle, is all about: we

are God's new creation through Christ and by faith alone.

Paul closes with "peace and mercy to all who follow this rule." This means to walk spiritually in a straight line with the new, living principle of Christ to guide you. Paul put the same idea in different words: "Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24). You are a new creation: now live like it! How sad it is when we follow the crooked path of our sinful nature instead!

On the other hand, what a joy it is to know that God's new creation is arising in every land, tongue, tribe, and nation! In Christ, we have a veritable global network that spans north, south, east, and west.

In two short lines, Paul ties the whole world together in Christ. It doesn't matter what nationality you are, Jew or Gentile. Through faith in Jesus, we are all a part of his people: "the Israel of God."

The burdens of guilt, sin, worry, and fear have been lifted for all!

Christ Jesus, Lord of all nations, help us to live like the new creation you have made us to be. Guide us to share your freedom from all burdens with all the world. Amen.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:1-14)

PAUL'S EXAMPLE

Thanksgiving Day is months away. However, we need not wait. Having a gracious God makes each day a *thanksgiving day*. Yet we are slow to give him thanks.

Prayer is to be a big part of our lives. It's a privilege, like few others. Yet we are slow to pray. Reread this week's lesson. Count

how many times Paul gave thanks to God and mentioned prayer.

"Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7). Let's follow Paul's example, this week and always, and live a life of thanksgiving and prayer!

Lord, help me often to give thanks and come to you in prayer. Amen.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. (Colossians 1:1,2)

BE THANKFUL FOR GRACE AND PEACE

If you were asked to make a list of what you are thankful for, what would be on it? Your spouse? Your health? Your paycheck?

In the introduction to the letter that we call Colossians, the apostle Paul has two suggestions for what could be put at the very top of your list: grace and peace.

Paul wrote this letter while imprisoned in Rome. He penned it to a group of Christians living in the ancient city of Colosse. It's very possible that Paul had never been there or personally met the members of this church. He had much to write about. He had received a report that the Colossians were in danger of drifting away from the pure gospel and settling for something less. Soon enough he would begin to address this. But first Paul had a greeting: grace and peace from God our Father.

What is grace? The pastor who confirmed me over two decades ago taught me well. It's God's undeserved love. Grace is God the Father sending his one and only Son, Christ Jesus, to a world of unholy and unfaithful people. Grace is Jesus living a holy life,

faithful to every law and to the will of his Father (something we haven't come even close to doing). Grace is Jesus on that Friday called *Good*, carrying all our sins to the cross and enduring God's righteous anger so we wouldn't have to. Because of grace, we now stand before God our Father as his holy and faithful children through Jesus. Thank God for grace!

What is peace? My dictionary defines it as a state of calm and quiet. There wasn't, at one time, "calm and quiet" between God and the Colossians (or us either). The sin that is inherited from father and mother and is committed daily with thoughts, words, and actions results in just the opposite between God and people. There is unrest, tension, and hostility. But by living perfectly, dying innocently, and rising victoriously, Christ Jesus has earned peace, real and lasting, for all. Our relationship with God our Father is now calm and quiet. We can lay our heads on our pillows each night and fall asleep knowing that all is good and well between God and us. Thank God for peace!

Dear Lord, I have so much to be thankful for. Most of all, I am thankful for your grace, which gives me peace. Amen.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. (Colossians 1:3-6)

PRAY THANKFULLY FOR YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST

“Son, say good things about others. Focus on the positive in a person and not the negative.” I remember my father giving me that advice. I’ve tried to follow it.

As we read the letters written by the apostle Paul, it’s striking how often he seemed to do what my father encouraged. Such was certainly the case when Paul wrote his letter to the church in Colosse.

Understand why Paul wrote this letter. He had received a report from their pastor that false teachers were trying to persuade the Colossians to embrace a more sophisticated kind of Christianity than that which they were first taught and had believed. Paul could easily have written his letter and jumped on the Colossians for being so foolish and stupid. He could have scolded them harshly. But he didn’t.

What did Paul do? He first told them that when he prayed, he did so for them, and thankfully too. He rejoiced in their Spirit-worked faith. He recognized that at one

time they had been dead in their sin and unbelief. But now they were miracles of God’s grace because the pure and simple gospel had come to them with power. He was thrilled to see their love for Jesus evident by the way they lived their daily lives. The Colossians didn’t just *talk* about loving one another with kind words and helpful actions. They actually *did this!* Their love sprang from their hearts because they had the hope of living with God forever in heaven. This is what Paul chose to focus on among the Colossians. This is what he thankfully prayed about to God from his prison cell in Rome.

It’s easy, because of our sinful natures, to dwell on the shortcomings and failures of our fellow Christians. But let’s follow Paul’s example. Every Christian in your life is someone to pray for thankfully and often. Thank God for the faith and the love for others that spring from every heart won for Jesus for time and eternity!

Dear Lord, I pray thankfully to you for the people in my life who also believe in you. Help us reflect your love to all people. Amen.

All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. (Colossians 1:6)

PRAY THANKFULLY FOR A GROWING AND FRUITFUL GOSPEL

When I was younger I worked for a farmer. I helped him plant the fields with seed corn in the springtime. Then, miraculously it seemed, the corn would grow, encouraged and enabled to do so by the spring rains and the summer sun. Come autumn, we were busy harvesting the corn to store in his silo and cribs. Most years, due to God's goodness, the harvest was bountiful. The farmer would pray thankfully to the Lord for the growth of the corn plants and the fruit they produced.

As Paul wrote to the Colossians, he too prayed thankfully for growth and fruit, but of a different kind. Paul gave thanks for the growth of the gospel and the fruit it was producing in the lives of believers.

Quite likely Paul had never been to Colosse. However, on his third missionary journey Paul did spend three years in Ephesus, a large town located about 100 miles or so to the west. In all likelihood, someone from Colosse (perhaps a man named Epaphras—we'll talk more about him tomorrow) came to visit Paul in order to hear from his lips the gospel of Jesus. The mes-

sage of God's grace touched the hearer's heart, creating the fruit of faith. Returning home, he shared the message with similar and amazing results. And in Colosse there was growth. A Christian church was planted where there had been none before. The members proclaimed to neighbors and friends the true, powerful, Spirit-filled message of the eternal Son of God putting on flesh and blood to rescue the world from sin and death. The church grew as the fruit of faith was produced in the hearts of more and more people. The gospel bore fruit in the lives of these new Christians too. They lived in real peace and true joy; they lived with purpose and meaning. Their faith in Jesus was evident by fruits of kind words and loving actions.

This fruitful growth was happening not just in Colosse but all over the world. Is it any wonder that Paul prayed thankfully to God?

Today the message of God's grace continues to grow and miraculously produce fruit in our lives and others as well. Let's pray thankfully.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the gospel that has been planted and is growing in my heart. Cause the message of your love for sinners to grow and produce fruit in others. Amen.

You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. (Colossians 1:7,8)

BE THANKFUL FOR FAITHFUL GOSPEL PROCLAIMERS

I have a nephew who, already as a boy, wants to be a pastor one day. When his grandparents visit, he conducts a service. He hands out folders and preaches a sermon. He wears a play robe that his grandmother lovingly made. Our family hopes that he will become a pastor one day, if it's God's will. Then my nephew can really preach the gospel to the members of his church. They will be thankful for him and his message of God's grace.

As Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians, he was thankful for their pastor. He encouraged them to be thankful for him as well.

During Paul's lengthy stay in Ephesus as a missionary, a likely scenario is that Epaphras came from his home in Colosse to meet and visit with the Lord's apostle. Epaphras learned from Paul the good news that Jesus is the Savior who was promised in the Garden of Eden to deliver all mankind from Satan's clutches. Paul viewed Epaphras as a brother in the Lord and a coworker for the gospel. He thoroughly instructed Epaphras in the teachings of the Christian faith. Then he commissioned his fellow servant to return home and freely share with others

what he had freely received, the gospel of Jesus.

And that's what Epaphras did. He faithfully ministered to his flock of believers. When teachers promoting a false, empty religion tried to lead his sheep and lambs astray, Epaphras traveled all the way to Rome to inform Paul and seek his help. Epaphras was concerned for his members because he was a faithful servant and minister of Christ. Paul was thankful for Epaphras, and the Colossians had every reason to be thankful for him as well.

Who has faithfully shared the gospel with you? Perhaps it was your parents, who brought you as a baby to the baptismal font and continued to share Jesus and his forgiveness with you as you grew. Perhaps it was teachers in Sunday school or a Christian elementary school who patiently taught you God's plan of salvation. Perhaps it was your pastor who taught you Luther's Small Catechism and confirmed you in the Christian faith.

Be thankful for those who faithfully shared the gospel with you in the past and continue to do so in the present. Where would you be without them?

Lord, thank you for the people in my life who have told me about you. Amen.

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience . . . (Colossians 1:9-11)

PRAY FOR WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE

When I was a freshman in high school, I was placed into an advanced algebra class. That was a mistake. I was overwhelmed when I took the first test. I prayed desperately for wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.

As Paul lived a life of thanksgiving and prayer, he asked for these things too, but in spiritual and not algebraic form. His prayer wasn't for himself either, but for his Colossian brothers and sisters.

It's easy to see why Paul prayed for this. Enemies of the gospel were pressuring the Colossians to turn away from it and embrace their religion which, supposedly, would bring greater and more sophisticated understanding, wisdom, and knowledge. Paul recognized these to be deceptive, damning lies of Satan. Paul knew there is no greater knowledge than knowing Jesus as one's very own Savior from sin, death, and hell. There is no greater wisdom than that of Christ, crucified and arisen, for all people of all time. There is no greater understanding

than being able to look into a mirror and say to one's self: "I know that I am a sinner who has failed to live a perfect life as God demands. For this I deserve punishment, now and forever. But God loves me. He sent his Son to live perfectly for me and to be punished in my place for all my sins. I'm forgiven, because the Bible says so."

Paul prayed for God to "fill" the Colossians with this knowledge, wisdom, and understanding through the Word. As God answered Paul's prayer for the Colossians this would result in great blessings. Reread the verses and see the benefits.

Before you pray for more wisdom and understanding, thank the Lord for the knowledge and faith that he has given you in Christ. Pray with confidence, remembering the words of James: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (1:5). Look for God to bless you too!

Lord, increase my understanding and wisdom for your glory and my good. Amen.

... and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:11-14)

BE THANKFUL FOR YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER'S BLESSINGS

I'm thankful for my father and for all he's done for me. I was not born to him, as his son. I'm grateful that my father adopted me to be his son and brought me into his family. I've been richly blessed by him. I'll always be thankful, and I try to thank him often.

Paul ends our text for this week by "joyfully giving thanks" to the heavenly Father for his great love and the priceless gifts of his grace. These blessings belonged to the Colossians. They're yours too.

There was a time when we needed to be rescued by our heavenly Father. Once we existed in unbelieving darkness and damning sin. Satan owned us, and we were walking hopelessly down the highway to his hell.

But, joyfully give thanks to our heavenly Father! He "has rescued" us. The cost was enormous. He gave the very best that he had: his one and only Son. Jesus was willing and eager to be part of this rescue mission, even though it would cost him the best that he had—his life. He humbled himself and dressed himself in human

flesh and blood to redeem us from the darkness of sin and Satan. By fulfilling every demand of God's law and enduring his Father's righteous anger for the world's sin, he paid the blood-and-death price to free us. In victorious triumph, he rose from his grave to shout to the world that sins were completely and forever forgiven.

But there's more to this rescue operation. The Father sent the Holy Spirit to bring us, still dead in sin and unbelief's darkness, "into the kingdom of the Son" by faith created through the gospel. Clothed and now wearing the robe of Jesus' perfection, we are "qualified . . . to share in the inheritance of the saints." Heaven is ours, already and eternally! As we live in a sin-filled world, we don't fully enjoy this inheritance. Soon we will. That's enough to encourage us to move forward through this vale of tears.

Joyfully thank your heavenly Father for his blessings. All is well for you, dear friend, and all will end well in the Son who loves and has rescued you!

Father in heaven, thank you for all the blessings of your love in Jesus. Amen.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. (Colossians 1:21,22)

CALLED OUT OF SIN

How much do you know about your family history? What is your ethnic background? In what countries did your ancestors live? When and why did your family move to the place where you live now?

Many people are interested in their family histories. It's not just curiosity. Knowing where we came from helps us understand who we are today. It helps us to appreciate the rich culture, customs, and traditions that make us who we are.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul teaches us about our spiritual history. He tells us where we came from. "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior." There was a time when we were not members of God's family. We were not citizens in his kingdom. Because of our sins, we were separated from God. We were like aliens and strangers living in a foreign country. We were people who did not belong. Because we were God's enemies, we could expect nothing from him except his righteous anger.

Knowing what we were helps us to appreciate what we are today. Notice the contrast in

Paul's words: "Once you were alienated. . . . But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." God brought us into his spiritual family by the death of his Son, Jesus. God laid all of his anger and punishment for sin on the physical body of our Savior, and he punished him to death in our place. For Jesus' sake, God forgives all our sins and accepts us as his own. By bringing us to faith in Jesus, God has made us his dear children.

When you study your earthly history, you might find a "rags-to-riches" story. Perhaps your ancestors were poor. They worked their little farm and grew their meager harvests, but life was hard back then. Things are better now. Knowing our humble beginnings helps us to appreciate the blessings we enjoy today.

Our spiritual history is the greatest "rags-to-riches" story that you will ever hear. Once you were alienated from God, but now, through faith in Christ, you are God's beloved children and heirs of everlasting life.

Thank you, Jesus, for making me a member of God's family! Amen.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. (Colossians 1:21,22)

CALLED OUT TO BE HOLY

We hated them. They were the scourge of adolescence. A single blemish, strategically placed where everyone could see it, was just about the worst thing that could happen. But it did happen and always at the worst possible time. If your senior pictures would be taken on Friday, you could bet that you would see a blemish—a bad one—when you looked in the mirror Friday morning.

Okay, so those blemishes were not the size of Everest the way we thought they were, but it really didn't matter. Even a small blemish could have devastating consequences. It might mean that we would have no date for the prom. It might mean that we would be too embarrassed to go to the prom at all. No wonder Americans spend millions of dollars every year on medications that fight blemishes. Unfortunately, the medications do not always work.

Blemishes occur all over, even on our souls. The Bible says that every time we sin it is a blemish in God's eyes. Even a single

blotchy imperfection on our souls makes us unsightly and disgusting to our God. God cannot and will not tolerate a sin. Every one of them would separate us from God's love forever.

Thankfully, God has provided us with the perfect "anti-blemish medication." On the cross of Calvary, God cured the sins of all humanity with a single application of Christ's blood. That healing medication came to me when I was washed in Holy Baptism. God keeps me free from sin by his promise of forgiveness written in the Bible. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, he assures me, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). John says in his first epistle, "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

In God's eyes, we are blemish free. The devil may continue to accuse us. He may do everything he can to point out our flaws and to highlight every imperfection, but God sees only perfection.

Heavenly Father, we confess that we have sinned and broken your commands. Wash us in the blood of Christ, so that we may be holy in your sight and free from every blemish of sin. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[God] has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. (Colossians 1:22,23)

CALLED TO CONTINUE IN FAITH

The Bible is filled with examples of people who received the grace of God, only to reject it at a later time and to turn away in unbelief. In the Old Testament, God chose the people of Israel to be his own, but most of them rejected God and lost their place in heaven. This was true even though God sent them many prophets to preach his saving Word.

Even one of Christ's apostles did not continue in his faith. Judas was one of the Twelve, chosen by Christ himself to have that privileged position. Judas saw the miracles of Jesus with his own eyes. With his own ears he had heard Christ's teaching. Yet in the end he turned away. For 30 pieces of silver, he sold Jesus to his enemies. Then he took his life by suicide.

Is it possible that you could fall away? Can you say, "I am a very strong Christian. There is no way I can fall"? Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (10:12).

Holy Spirit, work in my heart through your powerful Word. Preserve me in my faith, and give me life in heaven. Amen.

It is possible to fall away from Christ and to lose God's precious gift of everlasting life. Fortunately, we have a surefire defense against this danger, and it is not a complicated thing. Paul urges every one of us to "continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel."

Your faith will stand secure, established and firm, if you continue to hear and believe the saving message of God's Word. Every day, open up your well-used Bible and listen to the law of God. Don't shy away from what it says. Let it condemn you of your sins. Acknowledge your unworthiness to God. And every day, read again the simple and reliable promise of the gospel. The message is ever-new: God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son. Whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life. That's a fact, and nothing will change it. You and I may fail to keep our promises to God, but God will never fail to keep his promises to us.

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. (Colossians 1:24)

CALLED TO REJOICE IN SUFFERING

Can you think of a time when you suffered for the sake of Jesus? As often as it happens, it shouldn't be that hard. Perhaps a teenager faces ridicule and mockery because he will not join his classmates in their sinful ways. Perhaps you had a friendly conversation about religion with your neighbor, but that friendly conversation somehow became an argument. The argument became hurt feelings, and the hurt feelings became a broken friendship. What the apostles said is true: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

The apostle Paul faced sufferings because of his Christian faith. In fact, he faced a lot of them. Five times he was whipped. Three times he was beaten with rods. One time he was stoned and left for dead. He was shipwrecked an astonishing three times and even spent a full day in the sea, clinging to debris and swimming for his life. Even as he wrote this letter to the Colossians, Paul was in prison in Rome. He was on trial because he

had been preaching the good news of the gospel.

Amazingly, Paul did not seem worried by these problems. He even said, "I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church." Paul rejoiced in suffering, because he could see that his suffering had served a good purpose. Through his preaching, the Colossians had believed in Jesus. Their sins had been forgiven. On the Last Day, the Colossians would stand before God in heaven, perfect through their faith in Christ. Because his sufferings were a benefit to the church, Paul did not run away from hardship. He said that he would gladly take the full amount of all the suffering that God sent him.

God has a purpose in mind for your sufferings too. "We know that in all things"—even the painful things—"God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). That is reason to rejoice.

Lord Jesus, you have called me to suffer for your name. Give me strength to endure whatever troubles you might send. Use these sufferings for my benefit and for the benefit of your church. Amen.

I have become its [the church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. (Colossians 1:25-28)

CALLED TO UNDERSTAND THE MYSTERY

If you are a Christian, you are one of the wisest people in the world. This is true because God has given you an understanding of his Word. His Word has made you “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15).

This wisdom does not come naturally. The gospel is a mystery to human reason. How foolish doesn't it sound to reason that the God of all creation was born on earth as a little human baby? Doesn't it sound even more foolish to say that his mother was a virgin and that he had no human father? How silly doesn't it seem, that we could have eternal life in heaven—and all because a man named Jesus died on a cross like a criminal? It makes no sense to us. Human reason tells us that it cannot be true. Because it is offensive to our reason, the gospel is a mystery to sinful human beings. Not

one of us can believe it unless God works a miracle in us. “As it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9,10).

Not many have the wisdom of the gospel, but you do. Through the Word of God in the Bible, you understand the way to heaven. You know that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin mother, that he suffered, died, and rose again as your substitute, and that all who put their trust in Jesus have forgiveness and eternal life in heaven. Through Christ, you will stand before God on judgment day and he will declare that you are perfect—not because you never sinned, but because Jesus has washed all those sins away.

Who would have ever thought it? Only God. To him be the glory!

Father in heaven, I praise you for revealing to me the mystery of your salvation. Help me understand your Word and believe it with my whole heart. Amen.

I have become its [the church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. (Colossians 1:25-28)

CALLED TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL

It was one of the strangest appointments in history. Saul of Tarsus seemed to be the least likely candidate to be an apostle of Jesus. As a Pharisee, he had been an enemy of Jesus and a persecutor of the Christian faith. He traveled from town to town to imprison and even kill all who believed in Jesus. But God had other plans for him. On the road to Damascus, Jesus appeared to Saul and converted him to the Christian faith. Jesus washed away his sins and gave him the gift of salvation. And then he gave him something more. God gave Paul the job of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul said, "I have become [the church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness."

I doubt that Jesus has appeared to you in a flash of blinding light, the way he did to Paul. Yet your personal history has something in common with Paul's. In the verses

we've been studying this week, Paul reminded us, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior" (Colossians 1:21). Before we came to faith, we did not want to serve Jesus. We wanted nothing more than to follow our sinful desires. But God had other plans for us. He called us to faith, forgave our sins, and gave us his salvation. And then he gave us something more. He gave us the privilege of sharing his Word with others.

As a Christian, you have a great and noble purpose for your life. You are a messenger of Jesus. Through your sharing of the gospel, people will be saved forever. How amazing that Jesus would choose you! But that is what he did. Jesus gave us this command together with a promise: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:15,16).

Jesus, thank you for calling me to share your Word. Help me do it faithfully so that others will be saved. Amen.

God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. (Colossians 1:27-29)

CALLED TO UNITY WITH CHRIST

Those of you who are married may know the feeling well. A Christian marriage is more than two people who have decided to share one house. When you were married to your spouse, you were truly united to that person. Jesus said, "They are no longer two, but one" (Matthew 19:6). Everywhere you go, whether you are together or apart, you carry your spouse with you in your heart. That unity of hearts and lives is a never-ending joy and comfort. It gives you strength for living.

The Bible says that Jesus is our Bridegroom. Through faith, all believers are united to Jesus as his bride. This means that Jesus has become a part of us. We carry his wisdom, love, and power in our hearts everywhere we go. More than that, it also means that we are in God's heart. Our needs, worries, and concerns are always on his mind. What an amazing comfort as we live our lives for Christ!

This unity with Christ was a never-ending joy and comfort to

the apostle Paul. God had called Paul to do very difficult things. He had to suffer for the sake of Christ as he preached the gospel to the Gentiles. But Paul was not intimidated or afraid. He knew that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was living in his heart. The power to serve God would not come from Paul, but from Jesus. So Paul said with confidence, "To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me."

In our meditations this week, God has asked you to do some difficult things. He has called you to live a holy life. He has called you to suffer for his name. He has called you to share the gospel with all people. These are not easy tasks. Perhaps you wonder, *How will I be able to do everything that God demands?* Remember: Christ is in you. His energy will work powerfully in everything you say and do, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13).

Lord Jesus, live in my heart. Empower me to trust your Word and to bring forth fruits of faith. Amen.

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. (Colossians 2:6,7)

DON'T JUST FOLLOW THE LEADER, LIVE IN HIM!

My dad was a great coach. I wanted to follow in his footsteps. When I had the opportunity, I followed many of his coaching philosophies. I was rooted in tactics learned from him.

In the "game" of eternal life and death, we need much more than an earthly coach. We need Christ. Like the Colossian Christians, we believe in Jesus. But those believers were told by false prophets that Christ wasn't enough. Those deceivers stated that Christ plus something else was needed. Our readings this week remind us that all we need is Christ. It's not Christ plus. It's Christ. Period.

Oh, how we must hold to that truth today! In this sinful world, we are assailed by the voices of false prophets and deceptive religions that tell us Christ isn't enough. They tell us we need Christ plus our good works, or Christ plus our love, or Christ plus the ability to speak in tongues, and the list goes on and on. These wayward voices tempt us to believe that we need Christ plus something more.

But Christ is all you need. He lived the perfect life God demands of you. He shed his blood for your

sins. In your place on the cross, he suffered the torments of hell, the awful consequence of your sin. He rose victorious over sin, Satan, and death and offers you forgiveness and eternal life. Jesus is the one you need more than anyone or anything else. To keep out the voices that say otherwise, continue to live in Christ.

To live in Christ means to live in his Word, the Bible. It means driving your spiritual roots ever deeper into Christ through daily Bible study, through faithful church attendance, and through regular attendance at the Lord's Supper. Then, like a building rising out of the ground, you will grow spiritually stronger and taller. Then, strengthened in your faith, you will recognize the attacks that Satan and his evil forces throw your way, and you will withstand and overcome them as well.

We may want to follow in our parents' footsteps. But it is far more import to live in Christ. May God bless our meditations this week so that we believe ever more firmly that it's not Christ plus something else. It's Christ. He's all we need. Period.

Dear Jesus, help me live in you so that I learn to trust in you above all else. Amen.

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

DON'T BE TAKEN CAPTIVE

Do you have a home security system? Maybe it's your barking dog. As the world grows more evil, we treasure the gift of security. The last thing we want is someone to break into our house, tie us up, and hold us captive.

Did you know that we were once held captive by our sin and by the eternal death we deserve because of that sin? But Christ ransomed us with the price of his holy precious blood. He has set us free and given us the security of forgiveness and everlasting life. So why would you let yourself be taken captive again?

Yet that is what happens with many people. The basic human traditions of this world are the basic principles by which this world thinks and lives. They tell us that we have to do something to earn God's favor or heaven. Hinduism tells us to follow the right path. Islam tells us to pray five times a day, facing Mecca, and fast during Ramadan. Others say we have to keep the "golden rule" and love others as we would want them to love us. Maybe we have even

heard someone tell us that we "have to" pray the rosary or tithe.

The Bible, however, clearly states that all we need is Christ for salvation. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Jesus said, "I am the way" (John 14:6). Jesus didn't say, "I am the way, plus you still have to do something else."

Dear believer, Christ has set you free. Don't be taken captive by those who say you need to do more than trust in Christ. Christ says, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Your eternal security is not faith in Christ plus a patchwork of things you've done. Your eternal security is Jesus and all he did for you. He lived a perfect life for you, suffered the curse of your sin on Calvary's cross, and rose to assure you of eternal life in heaven. Don't be taken captive. Trust Jesus. He is your eternal security. He is all you need.

Dear Lord, let me never be taken captive by the belief that I need more than you for my salvation. Keep my eyes of faith ever focused on you and all that you did for me. Amen.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. (Colossians 2:9)

HE REALLY IS GOD

Do you like mysteries? Do you love a "whodunit" book or TV show? Many people enjoy these books and programs because they like to see if they can solve the mystery and figure out who committed the crime before it's revealed.

The Bible, however, reveals to us some amazing truths we could never figure out on our own. It shares with us mysteries we could never solve by ourselves. One such mystery is this: in the man Jesus Christ lives the fullness of God himself. Jesus is fully human and he is fully God. As we read the Bible, we see Jesus' full humanity. Like us he ate and drank, slept and cried, suffered and died. Yet unlike us, with just a word, he could drive out demons and heal the sick. He could feed thousands with practically nothing and raise the dead. He truly was and is fully human and fully God. Don't try to figure it out, just believe this wonderful truth. For faith is being "sure of what we hope for" (Hebrews 11:1).

Why is it so important to believe this truth? Today, as in the time of the Colossian church, some say you

need the help of angels and spirits. Others say you need additional revelations, knowledge, and insight. Others say you must keep certain rites and ceremonies. If you have Christ, that is good, but you need other things too. Jesus is not sufficient, they say. Jesus, by himself, is not enough.

But since Jesus truly is God, you don't need the help of saints or angels. Since Jesus truly is God, you don't also need Muhammad or Buddha. Since Jesus is truly God, you don't need your good deeds to help earn your way to heaven. Since Jesus truly is God, rely on his perfect life lived for you, his holy blood shed for you, and his mighty resurrection, which assures you of your resurrection. Since Jesus is God, why rely on anyone or anything else? You have all you need in Jesus. Because he is fully God, he is fully able to help you with every problem in this life and will fully bring you into life eternal.

Believe the mystery. Jesus really is true man and true God in one person. That means Jesus, the God-man, is all you need. He is your all-sufficient Savior.

Dear Jesus, help me know that everything I really need is found in you because you are both true God and true man, and therefore truly my one and only Savior. Amen.

And you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. (Colossians 2:10)

FULLNESS IN CHRIST

Growing up, I wanted to be fully as smart as my sister, fully as fast as my brother, fully as good as the athletes I saw on TV, and fully as good a musician as those I listened to. I never made it. I wasn't completely lacking in all those talents, I just wasn't as fully gifted. That's okay. God has given us all gifts, but not all the same gifts and not all in the same measure.

But what's really amazing is that I have fullness in Christ. This is the same Christ who is "the head over every power and authority." When the Lord said in the Old Testament that it was time for the Assyrians to fall and the Babylonians to rise, they did. When it was time for the Babylonians to fall and the Persians to rise, they did. When Jesus said, "Come out," the demons left. When Jesus cast Satan into the burning lake of sulfur (Revelation 20:10), Satan had no choice but to do what Jesus commanded. Even today, Jesus truly is the head over every earthly power and spiritual authority.

We sin when we think that the world is running out of God's con-

trol. We sin when we believe that Jesus has lost control of what's happening in our lives. He hasn't. He is still fully in control, making everything work for our good (Romans 8:28).

"And you have been given fullness in Christ." Your sins have been fully forgiven. You have been credited with the full perfection of Jesus. You have been given the full armor of God so you can take your stand against the devil's schemes (Ephesians 6:10-18). In Christ, you even have the power to send the devil packing. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). You have the full assurance of life everlasting through Jesus and all he did for you.

We may not have a full set of gifts when it comes to athletics or art, music or mechanics. But in Christ, we have a full set of all the spiritual gifts we will ever need. You fully have all you need in Christ.

*Though devils all the world
should fill,*

All eager to devour us,

We tremble not, we fear no ill;

They shall not overpower us.

(CW 200:3)

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for defeating Satan and all his evil forces and for giving me fullness in you. Amen.

In him [Jesus Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11,12)

CUTTING IS NEEDED

Ever have a loved one be diagnosed with cancer? That person may enter the hospital and a cutting may take place. Flesh is cut to expose the cancer; then the cancer is cut out.

In the Colossian congregation, the false teachers said Christ wasn't enough, some cutting had to be done—males still needed circumcision. But Paul reminds them that, in Christ, a cutting had already taken place, and it was all the cutting they needed. In Baptism, Christ cuts away the power of the sinful nature.

When we look into the face of a newborn, it's hard to believe that this little child is a heathen. But as David said, "I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). Paul wrote, "The sinful mind is hostile to God" (Romans 8:7). You and I come into this world as sinners opposed to God and his holy will. We come into this world a sinful mess.

But in Baptism, God works a miracle. In Baptism, the power of

that sinful nature is cut out. Just as Christ died bearing our sin so in Baptism, we die to sin. Just as Jesus was buried so our sinful nature is buried with Christ in Baptism. Just as Christ rose from the dead so we are empowered to rise each day and live a new life to him and his glory. We have the power to say no to sin. We don't have to succumb to the temptations of our sinful nature. In Baptism, God gives forgiveness and a new life and power. It's the power of Christ working in us through Spirit-worked faith that enables us to say *no* to sin and *yes* to Christ.

We were born with the cancer of sin that leads to eternal death. But our baptism in Christ connects us to Christ's death and resurrection. Although we are still sinners, the power of that cancerous sinful nature has been cut away and destroyed. In Christ, daily rise to live your new life to his honor and glory. For in Christ, you have the power to do just that.

Dear Lord, may my baptism remind me that the power of my sinful nature has been cut away. Help me daily live a new life to your honor and glory. Amen.

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 2:13,14)

NO LONGER DEAD

Ever catch a fish? As you bring it into the boat, it struggles to free itself from the hook. Sometimes it does, falling into the boat, where it flops around wildly. It's alive, but it's as good as dead unless someone puts it back into the water.

We were once the living dead. We entered this world physically alive but spiritually dead. That's why Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). Paul expressed that same truth when he told the Colossians, "You were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature." We are born with a sinful nature that strangles us, drowns us in sin, and leads to eternal death. Each of us needed a spiritual circumcision, a spiritual cutting away of the sinful nature. Only then could we have a new spiritual life.

That's what we have in Christ—new life. "God made you alive with Christ." He did that when "he forgave us all our sins." The Old Testament's written code with all its commands and regulations

required perfect obedience. It opposed us because we could never keep it perfectly. It condemned us for all our failures to love God with our whole heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. But Jesus fulfilled perfectly those demands. In effect, our Lord nailed those regulations to the cross, along with their damning accusations of our sin. On the cross, they were covered by the perfect blood Christ shed for us. Jesus then announced, "It is finished" or "Paid in full." To prove that every one of those rules and their damning curses has been paid in full, Jesus rose from the dead.

A spiritual circumcision was performed, along with a spiritual resurrection. "God made you alive with Christ." We now live a new life. We no longer flop around in the "bottom of the boat," dying a spiritual death without any purpose in life. In Christ, we've been cleansed from our sin and given a new life with meaning: to joyfully serve our Lord and Savior and all those around us. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Lord, thank you for cutting away my sinful nature. Empower me to live my new life to the glory of Jesus. Amen.

Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Colossians 2:15)

PROOF OF VICTORY

After the World Series or the Super Bowl, what happens in the winner's city? A parade is held with thousands of cheering fans lining the streets. What happens in the loser's city? Not much! The public spectacle made in the victor's city makes it clear who won and who didn't.

In Bible times, after a king conquered his enemy, he might hold a parade. In the procession would be disarmed enemy soldiers and, perhaps, the defeated king and queen. That public spectacle made it clear who won and who lost.

Our Lord did something similar. After Jesus' death and before he left the tomb, we believe that Jesus descended into hell. The Bible says, "Christ died for sins . . . the righteous for the unrighteous. . . . He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison" (1 Peter 3:18,19). What message did Jesus share with those souls and demons in hell's prison? Jesus didn't preach a second chance. "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Jesus didn't go there to suffer for sin. He suffered for sins on the cross. When he said, "It is finished" (John

19:30), he was publicly announcing that he had completed his suffering for our sins.

Why did Jesus descend into hell? To proclaim his victory. Having triumphed over death, sin, and Satan, Jesus publicly proclaimed in the halls of hell that he had won—Satan, sin, and death have been defeated.

What a blessing for us in this life! In his battle with Jesus, Satan lost. The devil doesn't hold power over us. In Christ, we can battle Satan and temptation and defeat them with the armor and weapons God gives (read Ephesians 6:10-18). Though not dead, sin and Satan lie defeated; we can say no to them.

What a blessing that is for our eternal life! We know eternal death is defeated. The eternal consequences of our sin have been paid for by Christ. Believers in Jesus' perfect life lived for us and his innocent blood shed for us will spend eternity with him in the sin-free, death-free, Satan-free home of heaven.

Christ is your all-sufficient Savior. The devil lies defeated. Christ conquered Satan. Christ is all you need. Don't let anyone tell you differently or make you believe otherwise.

Lord, through Word and sacrament, give me the confidence that I have all I need in my victorious Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. (Colossians 3:1)

YOU WERE RAISED WITH CHRIST

We Christians begin the week with worship. With each new Sunday, we celebrate again our Lord's resurrection from the dead. "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb" (Luke 24:1). When the women got to Jesus' tomb, they found an open grave that was empty. Jesus' body was not inside. Two angels suddenly appeared beside the women and announced to them the good news: "He is not here; he has risen!" (verse 6). With a mixture of fear and joy in their hearts, the women hurried back to tell the good news to Jesus' disciples. That good news never gets old. It remains fresh and new to this day: Christ was raised from the dead!

With each new Sunday, we celebrate another resurrection from the dead—our own. Yes, it's a fact. We were raised from the dead with Christ.

We were dead in our sins. God wrote down his commandments in the Bible. God's commandments regulate what is right and what is wrong, and they spell out the punishment for anyone who disobeys God: D-E-A-T-H. His command-

ments labeled us as sinners who deserve the everlasting death penalty from God. We had no spiritual life within us. We had no hope of ever experiencing everlasting life with God. We were dead in our sins.

Christ died for us. Christ, the Son of God, was nailed to the cross. The punishment spelled out by God's regulations—D-E-A-T-H—was tacked onto Christ while he was pinned to the cross. Because of Christ's death, God has forgiven all our sins. We are free from punishment. We will not die but live forever. God proved his forgiveness to us by raising Christ from the dead. Christ ascended into heaven. Now he sits at God's right hand with all power and authority.

God raised us with Christ. God raised us from the dead and gave us spiritual life when we were baptized. Paul wrote in Colossians 2:12, "[You were] buried with [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (NASB). We were baptized and have spiritual life within us. As we begin another week, we set our minds on things above!

God, thank you for raising me with Christ through my baptism. Amen.

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:2-4)

YOU HAVE A HIDDEN LIFE

The rollout of a new jet always brings excitement. The hangar doors open, and the aircraft is pulled out. A large veil covers the aircraft. The crowd can tell from the jet's outline that this is going to be one sleek, fantastic machine. But the jet remains hidden from sight until the moment for the unveiling occurs.

We Christians have a hidden life. Our life is hidden with Christ in God. We know enough from the Bible to know that our everlasting life after resurrection day is going to be glorious. "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11). "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever" (Daniel 12:3). "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:43). On resurrection day, our Lord Jesus Christ "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21). Then we will appear with him in glory.

We cannot see this glory right now. In this life on earth, we taste the bitterness that sin has brought. We feel sadness. We experience hurt. We are troubled by dark words and deeds. We get sick. We die. If we set our minds only on these earthly things, we forget things above. We forget the glory that is coming to us when Christ returns on the Last Day. With our minds on earthly things, we stop living in the joy of faith and start wallowing in the despair of what we see.

The apostle Paul says we died to earthly thinking. At our baptism, we died and we were buried with Christ. At our baptism, God also made us alive with Christ. Right now we are spiritually alive. We have a new life in Christ. Christ died for our sins. God forgives us. He promises to save us from death.

When the moment arrives, the cover is pulled off the jet and it remains hidden no more. When Christ, who is our very life, appears, then we also will appear with him in glory.

God, while I wait for my hidden life to be revealed, fill me with eager anticipation and keep my mind on things above. Amen.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires. . . . Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. (Colossians 3:5-7)

KILL YOUR EARTHLY LUST

Joseph was the most trusted servant over Potiphar's house in Egypt. Joseph had a handsome appearance and was successful in what he did. Potiphar's wife took notice. She felt attracted to Joseph and desired him. Day after day she tried to persuade him to sleep with her. Joseph refused. He asked her, "How . . . could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9)

Our God, Jesus Christ, tells us to gouge out our own eye if we look with lust at others. That's how serious God is about moral purity! Of course, the eye is not the root of the problem. Jesus tells us that adultery and sexual immorality come out of the heart. Earthly lust comes out of our earthly nature, which we have in us from our conception and birth. Our earthly nature desires what brings us short-term pleasure on this earth.

Kill this earthly nature! Put it to death! That is the Holy Spirit's command to Christians. We all should fear and love God that we lead a pure and decent life in words and actions. Husbands and

wives, keep your marriage vows and remain faithful to each other. Christians of all ages, honor God's gifts of marriage and sexuality. Beware of the temptations on the Internet and on television. Run away from every temptation as though it were a deadly bomb about to explode. Loathe all sin as death and poison to your soul. Do not be fooled by those who suggest that God will not judge earthly lust. "Because of these, the wrath of God is coming."

In his earthly life, our Lord Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are, but he remained without sin even in his thoughts. His obedience to God is credited to us as our righteousness. Jesus suffered and died on the cross with the sins of the whole world on him. His blood cleanses us from every sin. God has also forgiven the sinful ways we have walked in our lives on this earth. Now by faith we wait for our heavenly life with God.

With our minds on things above, we follow Joseph's example. We kill our earthly lust and honor God with our minds and our bodies.

God, thank you for cleansing me from all sin through Jesus my Savior. By your Spirit, create in me a clean heart. Amen.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: . . . and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. (Colossians 3:5-7)

KILL YOUR EARTHLY GREED

"I am the LORD your God. . . . You shall have no other gods" (Exodus 20:2,3). This is the first commandment God spoke to the people of Israel out of the thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai. The Lord had graciously rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. They were his people. They would find every blessing for earthly life and for the future heavenly life only in him. So he commanded them to worship him alone. Sadly, within the next 40 days, the people became guilty of open idolatry by worshiping a golden calf.

Jesus Christ saved us from being slaves to our fear of death. He graciously gave his own life for our benefit. We are his redeemed people. We will find every blessing for now and for ever only in him. He is our God who tells us, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. . . . But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. . . . You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:19-24).

Greed is the desire to always want more. It's a ravenous monster that wants to stuff itself until it feels full, but the belly of greed

is never satisfied. Greed wants more money, more food, more clothes, more books, more toys, more of anything and everything. The greedy monster lives in our earthly nature too. It is a part of who we sinners are from birth. Sadly, we exchange the Giver for his gifts. We become guilty of secret idolatry in our hearts whenever we want something more than we want God.

The apostle Paul says there is only one way for us Christians to deal with our greed. Kill it! Put it to death! Try as our earthly nature may, it is impossible for us to be greedy and to love God at the same time. One of them—either greed or God—has to go.

Thank God that our earthly greed has been forgiven by the death and resurrection of Jesus. We know his grace. He gave up all earthly treasures to give us a heavenly treasure. "We are rich, for he was poor; is not this a wonder? Therefore praise God evermore here on earth and yonder" (CW 64:3).

With our minds set on things above, we destroy the greedy monster within and worship the Lord our God alone.

God, forgive my greed. Grant me contentment with all your gifts to me. Amen.

But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice. (Colossians 3:8)

RID YOURSELF OF EARTHLY ANGER

David got angry. David and his men had taken good care of Nabal's shepherds and sheep. When it was time for the sheep shearing, David sent greetings to Nabal and asked that he provide some food and water for David and his men. Nabal was a foolish man. Nabal refused and sent an insulting message back to David. David's anger got stoked. He prepared his men to attack Nabal's house. Fortunately for Nabal, his beautiful and intelligent wife Abigail saved him from disaster. She brought food and drink to David and his men. She advised David to avoid shedding blood to avenge himself. That way, when David became king, he would not have on his conscience the guilt of having avenged himself in anger. David calmed down and blessed Abigail for her good judgment (see 1 Samuel 25).

"Don't speak or act while you are angry." That's good advice. How many people wish they could take back the words they spoke to a loved one while angry? How many people wish they could take back what they did to someone else while in a rage? When someone wrongs us, we are going to feel anger. We cannot love or be happy about what is wrong. But before

we let that anger stew and strike back, we must remember what Jesus has taught us: "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:39,44). Taking revenge is not our right—that is God's business (Romans 12:17-21).

Rid yourself of earthly anger! God does command us to avoid angry words and angry deeds. But God goes further. He commands us to root out the seeds of angry words and deeds. Those seeds are anger, rage, and malice. Have nothing to do with them! Get rid of them!

God's wrath against sin and against sinners will be revealed on judgment day. His heavenly anger, which is just and holy, will punish sinners for the earthly anger they have had in their hearts. Thanks be to God! The judge is also our Savior. In Christ we have a Savior from our earthly anger. By faith in Christ, we stand holy and blameless in God's sight because with his blood Christ paid for all our sins.

With our minds on things above, we also listen to the wise advice Abigail gave to David. We rid ourselves of earthly anger.

Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for saving me from your wrath against sin. Help me rid myself of needless anger. Amen.

But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: . . . slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other. (Colossians 3:8,9)

RID YOURSELF OF EARTHLY TALK

"Watch your tongue!" Parents say that to their children. Teachers say that to their students. Adults say that to one another. That warning flashes like a blinking red light at a corner. Stop! Don't go any further! Don't say anything you are going to regret. "Watch your tongue!"

God says that to his Christian people. God takes seriously every word we say. We may forget what we just said ten minutes ago, but God does not. He did not give us lips so we can ruin the reputation of another person. God did not make a tongue in our mouths so we can pass on juicy morsels that should make any godly person blush with shame. He did not create vocal chords within us so we can tell lies. God gave us our ability to speak so we can build another person up, so we can say what is right and good, so we can speak the truth in love. Before a word is on our tongue, he knows it completely (Psalm 139:4). Jesus tells us, "I tell you that men will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have

spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36,37).

What if God kept a file of every careless word we have spoken? Would we be able to stand before God's judgment bench and plead innocence? No. If God kept a record of all our earthly talk, none of us would stand. But with our God there is forgiveness. No sinful, earthly talk ever came off Jesus' lips. He still talked about birds and fish and harvests and other earthly things, but all his speech served a heavenly purpose. He told us the truth about God's salvation. Then he spoke seven sayings on the cross, and he died. He lives again to tell us we are loved and forgiven by our gracious God. He says he is coming back to give us a glorious and everlasting life.

With our minds on things above, we watch our tongues. We use them for good. We should fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, or give him a bad name, but defend him and speak well of him.

Lord Jesus, you tell me you love me and forgive me, and I believe it. Help me rid myself of careless words. Amen.

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Colossians 3:9-11)

YOU ARE NEW

"God created man in his own image" (Genesis 1:27). Adam and Eve were created with God's image in them. They were good from the inside out. But when they disobeyed God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they suffered a catastrophic loss. They lost the image of God. Now they were evil from within. Their children inherited a sinful nature from them. Adam fathered a son "in his own likeness, in his own image" (Genesis 5:3).

We were born in the image of our sinful parents too. The apostle Paul calls this sinful image "your old self." Our old self wants what is evil and does it. Our old self is filled with lusts, greed, anger, lies, and all other sins. The old self cannot be allowed to live in us. Every day we must take it off like a dirty set of clothes. Every day we must put it to death.

God saved us from our old self. God took our sins off us and put

them on Jesus Christ, a perfect man and the true Son of God. Jesus was put to death for our sins. He was raised to life as proof that we will never die because of our sins. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Christ.

God has also begun an amazing re-creation within every Christian. He is restoring his image within us through his powerful Word. At our baptism we died with Christ and were raised with Christ to a new life. We are new. We have a new life to live on this earth for Jesus Christ. So, with God's help, we drown the old self and put on the new self today by remembering our baptism.

Living as Christians is not about making ourselves into something we are not. Living as Christians really means being the new people God is making us to be. Our ethnic background or social status do not determine who we are in God's sight. We are in Christ, and Christ is in us all. We live today as the new us!

God, thank you for the new self you are re-creating within me. Give me strength today to take off the old and put on the new. Amen.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. (Hebrews 11:1,2)

BY FAITH—COMMENDED

It happened so quickly. One second the jet was taking off; the next, both engines were gone because of a bird strike. Now the pilot needed to decide what to do with a jet with 159 passengers and filled with fuel over one of the most populated cities in the world. He decided quickly that the only place for a possible safe landing was in the Hudson River. The pilot, copilot, and the flight crew received many commendations after this incident for their calm, cool response in the face of what could easily have been the loss of many lives, both on the plane and on the ground.

There are many people who are deserving of commendations in our world. The pilot and his crew acted based on the knowledge and experience they had gained over the years and based on what they could see. There are others who have lived in this world who acted based on knowledge they received from God and based on what they could not see. While we rightly give commendations today to those who complete heroic acts,

who are those whom God commends? God commends those who live their lives by faith in Christ their Savior.

God has filled our hearts with hope. We have the hope that our sins are forgiven, the hope of eternal life, the hope that he sends his angels to protect us, and the hope that he will control all things for the eternal good of his people. Are we sure? What confidence do we have that our sins are forgiven, that the angels do watch over us, and that God is in control of all things? That's what faith is. Faith is being sure that what God tells us is true. Many people have lived their lives by faith, and for this God commended them.

Consider the ancients who lived their lives by faith. They were so sure about God and his promises that they acted on what they could not see. They were commended as people of whom the world is not worthy. Let us see how we also, along with them, may live our lives by faith. That is why God commended the ancients.

Lord, help me to live my life by faith. Grant me a believing heart that trusts in your Word, that I may live my life certain of what I do not see and sure of the hopes your Word has placed in my heart. Amen.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (Hebrews 11:3)

BY FAITH—UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINS OF THE UNIVERSE

"The disciples did not understand . . . what he was talking about" (Luke 18:34). No matter how many times Jesus told his disciples that he would suffer, die, and rise again on the third day, the disciples didn't understand what he was talking about. Then, when he rose from the dead, Jesus opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures.

We too live in a world where many people do not understand that the universe was formed at God's command. Many prefer explanations from people who were not present when the universe was formed, instead of the eyewitness account of the One who was. What shall we think in the face of the rational and scientific explanations given for the origins of the universe? It is true that the heavens declare the glory of God. It is true that the skies proclaim the works of his hands. We stand in awe of the wondrous creation that the human body is. God's wisdom is evident in all that he has created.

Finally, though, we cannot rely on what we see to prove how long

it took or what was used when the universe was formed. It is by faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command. It finally comes down to trusting the well-considered opinions of fallible human scientists or trusting the eyewitness account of the God who formed everything that we see out of what was not visible.

As Jesus opened the minds of his disciples so they could understand the Scriptures, so we ask Jesus to open our minds so that we may understand that the universe was formed at God's command. His resurrection is the convincing proof that everything written in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms is true.

This is the same Jesus who demonstrated his power as God by raising Lazarus from the dead, and even raising himself from the dead. This is the same Jesus who was present at the creation of the world. Through him everything that we see came into existence. This is the same Jesus who said, "Haven't you read . . . that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female?'" (Matthew 19:4).

Lord Jesus, when we are troubled or tempted by this world's explanations as to the origins of the universe, we ask you to open our minds so that we understand from Scripture that the universe was formed at God's command. Amen.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8)

BY FAITH—FOLLOWING FEARLESSLY

"Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." If the Lord said that to you, would you go? Would you leave a country in which you are comfortable, to live in a country where the conveniences of home are not the same? Would you leave a country where power and water outages are relatively few and short in nature to live in a country where the electricity often went out and the water often didn't flow? Would you leave the comfort of a language you've known all your life to learn a language that you've never heard? Would you leave frequent family gatherings for a life in which you never saw your family? Would you leave behind all you know and start out for a completely new country and people without even knowing the land to which the Lord was leading you?

Why did Abraham obey the Lord and go, even though he didn't know where he was going? Abraham's faith was not in what he could see. Abraham's faith was in the One he could not see. Faith

is following the Lord fearlessly, and Abraham demonstrated that faith by obeying and going. Faith is trusting that the Lord will take care of us, no matter what may happen along the way.

By faith, our missionaries go to lands in which they did not grow up. They don't know the language; they face changes and difficulties that we can't imagine. They go to countries where their health faces threats unknown to us, where honesty can be in short supply, and where they are far from family and friends. Why do they go? They put their trust in the Lord, who has called them. They go because their Lord and ours says, "Go and make disciples of all nations!" (Matthew 28:19). They go by faith, trusting that we will provide for their physical well-being so that they can provide spiritual nourishment to people who are living in darkness.

Does it sadden our hearts when missionaries are recalled from the field for lack of funds? By faith we listen to our Lord and sacrifice where we can so that those who do not believe may hear the gospel message.

Lord, strengthen my love for everyone so that I sacrificially support those who are willing to obey and go to foreign fields. Help them preach the gospel where I cannot go. Amen.

By faith [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:9,10)

BY FAITH—LOOKING FORWARD

"Dad, can we go to the zoo?" Life is busy, and I don't know when I can fit a trip to the zoo with my children into my schedule, so I say, "I'll think about it." My children learned after a while that "I'll think about it" often meant "I'd like to, but it's not possible." I don't want to make promises that I later cannot keep.

The Lord promised to make Abraham into a great nation, make his name great, and bless all people on earth through him. Abraham did not see those promises fulfilled during the remainder of his lifetime on this earth. But he could see something else. He could see "the city with foundations, the city whose architect and builder is God."

Abraham realized that he couldn't gain entrance into that divine city by himself, for he had sinned against the Lord who had called him. Instead, he trusted in the righteousness of the One who would be a blessing for all people, including him. Abraham trusted

that one of his own descendants would be his Savior from sin so that he could be admitted into this divine city.

Although Abraham readily confessed every day that he didn't deserve this blessing, his heart was still filled with hope as he looked forward to the divine city with lasting foundations. He knew that every night he tented in this life, he was one night closer home.

That same offspring of Abraham was born on this earth to take away my daily sins also. Rather than spending my life looking into the abyss of hellish fire, I look forward to life in the divine city. Jesus' perfect life and innocent death make me a citizen of that divine city. By faith in Jesus, I am made a child of Abraham and a child of my heavenly Father. No matter what happens to me here, I know I'm just tenting every night, until I reach the heavenly city, which is beyond compare.

Lord, I confess to you my many sins, which I know have earned me an eternity of suffering. Thank you, Jesus, for suffering that eternal punishment in my place, so that I can live every day looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Amen.

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. (Hebrews 11:11,12)

BY FAITH—BLESSINGS BEYOND COUNT

At the age of 75, Abraham left his home, his people, and his father's household to live in tents for the rest of his earthly life, trusting in the One who called him, who was planning and building a divine city for him.

In order for this promise to be fulfilled, Abraham and Sarah would need to have a child. While this is not beyond the expectations of parents of child-bearing age, it is natural to wonder how this could be with parents who were long past those years.

The oldest known delivery in our age is that of a woman in India who was 72 years old when she gave birth to twins in 2008. Sarah was 90 years old and hadn't been able to have a child her whole life, while Abraham was 99, and they both knew that humanly speaking they were beyond the years of having any children. So how were they enabled to become parents at this late stage in life?

Lord, forgive me for the times that I have failed to live my life trusting in your promises. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for bearing my lack of trust on the cross. Help me live my life by faith, trusting in your faithfulness to give blessings beyond count. Amen.

By faith! Even though Abraham was past age and Sarah was barren, by faith they were made able to have a child. How could Abraham have known that this would be possible? Abraham "considered him faithful who had made the promise."

At times it may seem to some of us that life is without hope and without a future. Had Abraham only looked at present realities, he might have agreed with us. He struggled also and had attempted human solutions that failed. The same Lord who promised 99-year-old Abraham a child is the same Lord who sent a Savior from sin and promises to be faithful to us and to give us blessings beyond count.

When we lose our hope in the present or the future, let us look up to the stars of the sky, the same stars that the Lord challenged Abraham to count. Let us remember that by faith, we are among the countless descendants of Abraham.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. (Hebrews 11:13)

BY FAITH—ALIENS AND STRANGERS

How strange it must have been for Abraham to live his life by faith, while many around him didn't understand. A missionary can also feel very out of place living in a foreign land.

Abel offered a better sacrifice by faith than did Cain, and Abel's blood cried out to the Lord from the ground.

Enoch was commended as one who so lived his life by faith that God spared him the agony of death. Without faith it is impossible to please God, but it is that very faith that makes one an alien and stranger here on earth.

Noah lived his life by faith and, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark. By his faith he condemned the world. Noah became an heir of righteousness by faith, while all those who took no heed of his faith perished in the flood.

Abraham lived his life by faith, leaving home for the promised land, looking forward to the divine city, and considering the Lord faithful who had made him all these promises.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They

didn't receive the things promised while they lived here, because they were looking forward to the life that was to come. They spent their lives looking off into the distance at the cross, on which their descendant would be crucified and die and become a blessing to all nations.

And by faith they knew that they didn't quite fit into this sinful world. It wasn't their permanent home. This wasn't their permanent way of life. Here they were aliens and strangers. Heaven was their home!

By faith we bring sacrificial offerings, as did Abel, knowing that the sinful world will never recognize why we do so. We realize that only by faith will we apprehend the righteousness of Jesus our Savior and so walk by faith day by day. By faith we warn others who consider it foolish that this world is marked for destruction, not by flood but by fire. We live in holy, reverent fear, awaiting the great and glorious day of the Lord. By faith we know that this world isn't our permanent home, so we live as aliens and strangers here, for heaven is our home.

Lord, move me to live my life here as an alien and stranger, remembering that heaven is my home. Amen.

People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:14-16)

BY FAITH—LONGING FOR A BETTER COUNTRY

Missionaries who serve for years overseas become accustomed to the culture they experience in a foreign country. They might think that they can move back to the United States with no problem, because "It's where I grew up!" But often when a missionary moves back home, things just don't quite seem the same. In fact, in can be an even greater culture shock moving back than when he and his family first moved overseas. When missionaries return to America, it just never seems quite like home.

When we live by faith, we thank God that he has shown us our own sinfulness. When we see our sins against God and confess those sins to him, he forgives each and every sin and cleanses us of all unrighteousness through the blood of Jesus our Savior. God clothes us with every good and righteous act that Christ performed, so that he sees not us but

him. That's what it means to live by faith.

Living by faith in the forgiveness of sins leads us to the better country, the country for which we all long. Once we reach that heavenly country, all mental, emotional, and physical pain will be gone. All crying and mourning will be gone, as God wipes every tear from our eyes. All death will be gone, as no one ever dies. All this will be replaced by eternal pleasures at God's right hand. Dear Lord Jesus, open our eyes a little bit to the glories of that heavenly country, that we are encouraged daily to live our lives boldly by faith!

As we humbly live our lives by faith each day, we thank God that he is not ashamed of us, that he is willing to be called our God. We thank God for the city that he is preparing for us and to which one day he will take us. We can't wait to be there, in that heavenly country!

Oh, sweet and blessed country, The home of God's elect!
Oh, sweet and blessed country That eager hearts expect!
Jesus, in mercy bring us To that dear land of rest;
You are with God the Father And Spirit ever blest. Amen. (CW 214:4)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, . . . (Hebrews 12:1)

THROW OFF THE EXTRA WEIGHT

Running technology and now even swimming technology have developed clothing that really helps make the athletes faster on land and in the water. They have improved the aerodynamics or aqua dynamics and reduced the drag so much that old records are frequently broken and new ones frequently set. Who would have thought that the rather light and skimpy clothes athletes wore in the past would have hindered them so much, but they must have. Why do these new racing developments matter so much? Why is there so much money poured into the research? Because world-class athletes run to win!

Sin creates a drag on us Christians as we strive to run the good race of faith. No matter how small or unimportant a sin may seem to us, it creates an anchor-like drag on us that will eventually prevent us from even finishing the race. That is why the writer to the Hebrews encourages us to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so

easily entangles. This means that we may have to end an unhealthy relationship or stop visiting places that are full of temptations for us. It means that we may have to move the computer out of the bedroom and into the kitchen or living room. But it also means that we will go to worship today or to the pastor's office to confess our sins, that is, to throw them off. But there we will also hear with ready and believing hearts the great promise that God has put away our sins by the blood of his Son, Christ Jesus, and he holds open for us the gates of our heavenly home.

We are surrounded by a great cloud of believers who have witnessed the promise-keeping work of our God. (The writer mentions many of them in the previous chapter.) They suffered and endured much because of their faith, and from the pages of the Bible, they are encouraging us to live a life of repentance, so that we may join them in the home God has built for us.

Heavenly Father, thank you for surrounding me with such a great cloud of witnesses in your Word. Help me by your Spirit to rid my life of every sin that hinders and prevents me from reaching my heavenly goal. Amen.

... and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. (Hebrews 12:1)

RUN WITH PERSEVERANCE

Maybe you're not much of an athlete. That's okay. But perhaps you can appreciate the endurance of world-class, long-distance runners. For many of us, a 30-minute stroll may seem like vigorous exercise. So imagine the hours of training it must take for world-class runners to make a marathon look so easy and effortless! They have built up such stamina that even the muscles of their faces are completely relaxed.

Perhaps you've heard the statement "Life is not a sprint; it's a marathon." Although the pace of life is quite a bit different, many of the rules of running still apply. The writer to the Hebrews counsels you to "run with perseverance," that is, to live your life with the knowledge that this is not a test of your speed but of your endurance. Your spiritual stamina is going to be challenged. Satan tries to lead you off the track marked out for you by God's Word. Voices from society try to seduce you to take a pleasant detour. Voices from within your own mind scream at you to quit, to give up, or to take up the race later in life. But these are the voices of your

enemies, and they desire nothing less than to see you fail. Do not listen to them.

Listen instead to the voice of your Father, who loves you and has given you the victory through Christ Jesus our Lord. With these words he is cheering you on to that certain victory. "Don't stop. Keep running with perseverance the race I have marked out for you! You're on the right track!" Even world-class athletes receive encouragement and nourishment along the marathon course, and so it is for the Christian who runs the great race of faith. You receive encouragement and nourishment as you hear, read, study, and meditate on God's Word. Through his Word and sacraments, your loving Father silences the enemy voices that try to dissuade you. He drowns them out when he announces, "Your sins are forgiven! My Son paid for them all with the blood he shed." He lifts your spirits and makes you feel light on your feet when he declares, "You are righteous!" He renews your hope when he promises, "I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

Dear Father, please keep encouraging me through your Word, so that I may continue to run my race with perseverance. Amen.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

FIX YOUR EYES ON JESUS

Good track coaches train their runners to look straight ahead toward the finish line. That's because even the slightest movement of the head slows a runner down. By looking around, a runner can be slowed just enough to allow another, more focused, runner to pass and win. A faster but undisciplined runner can lose to a slower disciplined runner. For a competitor there is nothing worse than living with the knowledge that he snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

Our Savior God has secured complete, eternal victory for you. He does not want you to suffer eternal agony with those who have snatched eternal death from the jaws of victory. So he encourages you to rid yourself of the sin that entangles your feet and trips you. In the verse today, he urges you to keep your eyes locked on his Son, Jesus. Jesus is the author of your faith. He is also the perfecter of your faith. That is, he is the one who finishes or completes your faith. He is the one who

brings your faith to its goal, the salvation of your soul.

Consider all Jesus has done to be named the author and perfecter of your faith. The writer reminds us that for the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross and scorned its shame. With full certainty that he would conquer sin and Satan, death, and hell, and for the joy of saving sinners like you to spend eternity with him, Jesus endured the agony of God's punishment against yours and all sin and died. He mocked the shame that death on a cross brought on one who was numbered with criminals. By his death and resurrection, he has turned the cross, which once was a symbol of shame, into a symbol of victory and hope for you and all who believe. Jesus now rules with all power and authority. He rules all things so that you hear this good news and that by his Spirit you believe it and have inherited eternal life. As you run the race of faith today, stay focused on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.

Holy Spirit, by your Word, focus the eyes of my heart always on Jesus. Amen.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:3)

JESUS' ENDURANCE IS YOUR ENDURANCE

Opposition—whether from an opponent in sports, from a sickness in life, or from an enemy in battle—does not create character or heroism, it reveals it. The entire life of our Savior was filled with opposition: opposition from the devil, opposition from sinners, opposition from enemies, opposition from worldly philosophies, and on the cross opposition from God himself in the form of punishment against the sin of the world, and opposition from death. What does all this reveal about our Savior? It reveals to us that he is the Son of God, who though tempted in every way just as we are was without sin. It reveals his strength, his courage, his wisdom, his patience, and most of all, his love for sinners like us.

Today, you too are going to face opposition from some of these same enemies. Perhaps you will continue your struggle against sickness. Maybe you will have to endure harsh treatment from clients or colleagues at work. For sure you are going to face the devil and temptations. You are going to confront worldly ideas that war against the gospel

and your soul. You will drag around a sinful nature that desires anything and everything that is not godly.

What will such opposition reveal about you? Will it reveal that you were unprepared to face such a struggle? Will it reveal your weakness and faint heart? It doesn't have to. Consider Jesus. Consider what he did. Consider why he did it. Consider for whom he did it. The Son of God already conquered all the foes you will face today. He did it because he loves you. He did it all for you, who has been inseparably joined to him through Baptism.

Consider Jesus when you face the struggles and opposition you will face today. Sickness? Jesus overcame it and so will you. The devil and temptation? Jesus destroyed the devil and his works and, joined to Jesus, so have you. Enemies, sinful philosophies? With his Word Jesus confronted and overcame the world and with his Word so will you. Death? Jesus has conquered death and, joined to Jesus, so have you. Rely on Jesus and his victories, and you will persevere and win the victory.

Lord Jesus, thank you for enduring opposition for me and for giving me the endurance to finish the day victorious. Amen.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." (Hebrews 12:4-6)

TOUGH TRAINING FOR THE CHILDREN OF GOD

Every coach I ever had pushed me. They always wanted more from me than I thought I could give at the time. Sadly, I appreciated their efforts only after I realized my accomplishments. Until then I complained and grumbled at all the drilling, all the practice, and all the running.

Sometimes it works that way for us who live under the loving lordship of our God. How quickly do we fill our mouths with a streak of complaints whenever we must endure even the slightest inconvenience? But the writer reminds us that we have nothing to complain about. Though the training may be tough, we have not been called upon to shed our blood because we have refused a temptation to sin.

The writer challenges us to find encouragement instead amid our struggles and temptations. He quotes Proverbs 3:11,12 to remind us that we have a true Father in

heaven who, like our earthly parents, trains us with discipline. He does this daily through his Word and weekly in Sunday worship by calling us to repentant of our sins and by assuring us of his forgiveness. He allows us to endure hardships in life. He allows us to suffer the consequences of our sinning. Whether physical, emotional, or mental, the pain is real. But God allows this because he loves us and does not want us to stray and to be lost to him forever. He allows this because he loves us and wants to improve us. If he did not love us, he would let us walk away without a struggle.

Instead of complaining, thank God for his discipline! Such discipline demonstrates to us that the love he expressed to us in giving us the life of his own Son is real and enduring. It shows that our Father's love, expressed on the cross and by the empty tomb, keeps holding us in his heart.

Father, forgive me for complaining, and by the power of your love, turn it into thanksgiving for your love. Amen.

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. . . . No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:7-11)

GOD TELLS US THE TRUTH ABOUT DISCIPLINE

I was disciplined by my parents, weren't you? Or perhaps it was a step-parent or a grandparent, a teacher or a coach, but someone along the way, to one degree or another, provided discipline for us. They disciplined us because they loved us and wanted us to improve our behavior and character, our skills and knowledge, even our faith. The writer reminds us that "everyone undergoes discipline." Children who do not receive discipline are not truly loved and, in that sense, they are not legitimate children. Or as we might say today, they don't have legitimate parents.

Through our spiritual adoption by Baptism, God is our legitimate Father and we are his true children. He loves us. The life and cross of his one and only Son, whom he offered for us, is abundant proof of that love. He continues to show his love for us by disciplining and training us.

Because he has invested so dearly in us, he is not willing to lose us again to sin and unbelief. Instead, he trains us in godly living; he disciplines us so that we might live.

To keep us from trusting our wealth, he may send or allow financial hardships or economic downturns. To keep our focus heavenward, he may send sickness. To keep us from becoming conceited in our position as his children, he may allow us to suffer "thorns in the flesh." None of these things are pleasant to endure, but God always works them for our benefit, so that we may be strengthened in faith as we seek comfort and counsel from his Word. Then, with a renewed faith, we will produce a harvest of good works. Then, we will live in the peace of God, which will guard and keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting.

Dear Father, thank you for loving me so much that you discipline me. Help me to see the blessings of your love and discipline. Amen.

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. (Hebrews 12:12,13)

HELP OTHERS

The writer summarizes this section of Hebrews chapter 12 by alluding to Isaiah 35:3 and by quoting Proverbs 4:26. If you check the context of these passages, you will understand that the writer is again calling to mind the picture of running a race. The purpose of running a race is to win it. To do that a runner will eliminate every possible hindrance. He will train hard and accept the discipline of his coaches so that he can improve his strength, stamina, speed, and skill. He will also make sure to run a smart race. Although the course is determined for him, a runner will choose to avoid obstacles along the course.

God, however, adds one final thought for those running the race of faith that would be considered bad advice in the running world. In addition to strengthening ourselves by keeping our focus on Jesus, he wants the strong to help the weak by removing obstacles from the track, so that together they may run to victory. Remember, our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but

against the evil powers and forces in the spiritual realm (Ephesians 6:12-18). Other people are not the competition. The competition is the devil, the world, and our own sinful natures. These are what place obstacles and temptations in our path.

The more obstacles that fill the road of faith, the greater the danger a believer will stumble and fall. This is especially true for the weak or lame Christian. So the writer encourages us, "Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees." Through daily devotions, train your eyes on Jesus and see how he lived for you. Gaze upon the cross where he defeated all the competition for you. Look into the empty tomb where Jesus pulled the teeth out of death, even yours. From Jesus and his Word, you will receive strength and power from God. And as you have received strength from God, help others to focus on Jesus for the strengthening of their faith. Remove whatever obstacles or temptations you can. In this way, we will all finally win and obtain the victory promised to us.

Holy Spirit, through the means of grace, strengthen me for the race ahead. Use me to assist those who are weak, so that together we may come to the blessed joys of heaven. Amen.

DAILY PRAYERS

SUNDAY

Morning

As we begin another week, dear Lord, help us realize that every moment of every day remains a precious gift from you. Strengthen us through your Word that we may spend our time this week serving you and the people you have placed around us. Draw us closer to you as you feed our faith in worship today, for in you alone we find joy and gladness! Amen.

Evening

Another day draws to a close, my Savior. I have failed and fallen short of your will in so many ways. Forgive me for all my sins. Lead me to be confident that you will never fail me, but will continue to strengthen and uphold me in every challenge. Keep me in your care, dear Jesus, that I might live for you today and with you forever. Amen.

MONDAY

Morning

Holy Spirit, you alone can teach us what true love is. Show us our Savior and his great love for us that led him to the cross and empty tomb. Work in our hearts that we may love you above all things. Enable us to show our faith in the way we love our neighbor. Work through us, dear Comforter, that others may learn to know and love you as their Lord. Amen.

Evening

I praise you, Lord Jesus, for you alone can bring lasting joy to my heart. Yet, too often I go through life in fear, worry, and sadness. For such forgetfulness, forgive me, dear Savior! Teach me to turn to you to find joy in every circumstance of my life. Drive away every fear and doubt, for I trust in you for all that I need for today and forever. Amen.

TUESDAY

Morning

Almighty Father, the world appears to be in such turmoil. In our own lives, we feel the crushing effect of sin. We yearn for peace and security. Thank you for sending your Son to restore our relationship to you. When our sins trouble us, fill us with the peace that can only come from your forgiveness. Enable us to live at peace with others, as we reflect your peace that surpasses all understanding. Amen.

Evening

Dear Lord, in your mercy you have remained patient with me in spite of my many failings. Too often I am quick to lash out at those who speak against me. Forgive me for my lack of patience. Grant me a spirit that is willing to yield to others and a patient heart that relies on you to meet my every need. Amen.

WEDNESDAY

Morning

We thank you, merciful Father, for the kindness you show us every day. You continue to shower us with every good and perfect gift that we need for our spiritual and physical life. Move us to be kind to others. Enable us to share your forgiveness with those who are hurting. Lead us to share of your bounty with all who are needy. Let your kindness flow through us to a world that desperately needs it. Amen.

Evening Holy Spirit, too often I focus on the bad in this world around me. I have not kept myself pure but too easily have given in to temptation. Create in me a clean heart that loves what is good, as I treasure your forgiveness. Help me to see the good in those around me, that I may not criticize them but build them up as we join to serve you and glorify your name. Amen.

THURSDAY Morning I praise you, heavenly Father, for remaining faithful to every promise you make in your Holy Word. I stand secure in your saving message, for you always remain true to your word. Help me to be faithful in honoring and serving you. Lead me to keep my word and remain true to every promise I make. Lord, make me holy through your truth; your Word is truth. Amen.

Evening Dear Savior, by your example you teach us that Christian gentleness is never weakness. Though you possess all power, you lead us with a gentle, loving hand. Too often we treat one another harshly as we look out for our own benefit. Help us view others as you see them, as precious lambs for whom you gave your life. Give us a gentle heart like yours, Lord Jesus. Amen.

FRIDAY Morning Every day, Lord Jesus, I struggle. My sinful nature strives to pull me away from you, while my new heart of faith remains eager to serve you. Grant me the self-control to say no to the temptations thrust upon me by the devil, the world, and my own sinful nature. Point me to your cross, where I find forgiveness for my sins and the motivation to live for you. Amen.

Evening Holy Spirit, I can only produce your fruit as you strengthen and nourish my faith. Keep my connection to Jesus my Savior strong as you feed my faith with your Word and sacraments. As I bear fruit for your glory, work through my words and actions to strengthen and encourage everyone I meet to know and worship Jesus as their Lord and King. Amen.

SATURDAY Morning We praise you, dear God, for your great love and mercy that remain new every morning. You have given us the gift of another day and have promised to provide for our every physical and spiritual need. Thank you for your loving care! Bless us in all we do today, and keep our focus on your power and guidance as we live for you. Amen.

Evening Stay with us, dear Lord, for it is evening. As we lie down to rest, grant us hearts that remain at peace with you and the world. Refresh our souls with your forgiveness and love, as you carry every burden for us. Refresh our bodies as we sleep tonight, that we may awake renewed and ready to serve you another day. We entrust ourselves into your care. Amen.

SPECIAL PRAYERS

TRINITY Holy, holy, holy is your name, O triune God almighty! We stand in awe of your power in creating us and our world, dear heavenly Father. For your amazing grace in living and dying for us, we give you glory, O Jesus. Holy Spirit, we praise you for making us your own through your gift of faith. Though we cannot understand how you are three and one at the same time, we trust your Word and believe your promises. Continue to rule over us in your mercy and strength, O triune God, that we may be your people forever. Amen.

GRADUATION Dear Lord, your hands have made and formed us. You have handpicked our gifts and abilities, which we use to serve you. We thank you for the way those who are graduating have applied themselves and used their talents for the glory of your name. As graduates face a transition in their lives, guide them to seek your will for their futures and lead them to paths that will be a blessing for both them and you. We thank you for all who teach and learn. Go with our graduates and bless them wherever they go and in whatever they do. Amen.

FATHER'S DAY O gracious God, today we celebrate your gift of fathers. In your wisdom you give them the responsibility to be heads over their families. Strengthen and encourage fathers everywhere through your Word to carry out this important calling! Use them to bring their families to your feet, where they can hear of your love and power. Bless them as they share your Word and bring up your children to know and love you as Lord and Savior and to serve and love others in Christian joy. Lead children to respect their fathers just as they respect and honor you, our heavenly Father. Amen.

MARRIAGE What a wonderful gift you gave, loving Father, when you created Eve and brought her to Adam in the first marriage! We thank you for this blessing from your hand. Bless husbands and wives as they seek to glorify you in their married lives together. Forgive us for the times we have sinned against your gift of marriage by careless words and thoughtless actions. As you refresh us with your loving pardon, lead us to view our marriages as a taste of heaven, where we will joyfully be united with Christ, our Bridegroom, for all eternity. Amen.

VACATION TIME Lord Jesus, you give rest and relaxation as gifts from your gracious hand. As we take time away from work this summer to recharge our batteries, remind us that we live for you even as we travel and get away. Keep us safely in your care as we journey. Give us opportunities wherever we go to share our faith in you and witness to your glory. Bless us as we return to our daily lives, so that renewed and refreshed, we may continue to serve you wherever you have placed us. Amen.

MISSIONS Risen Savior, at your ascension you called us to be your witnesses. Bless our sharing of your saving truth with those we daily meet. Work through all who proclaim your Word on our behalf in missions at home and throughout the world. Pour out your Holy Spirit on all who hear their message, that many may believe your saving truth and join us in heaven. Lead us to eagerly support mission work with our prayers and gifts, to the glory of your name. Amen.

FOR THE SICK AND OTHERS FACING TRIALS Heavenly Father, you remain our refuge and strength, an ever present help in times of trouble. Grant comfort to those who are sick or facing trials. Bring them relief and healing according to your will and assure them of your love as you work in all things for their good. Give them patience to leave the answer to their prayers to your gracious timing. Guide those who care for them to use their God-given skills for your purpose. Trusting your answer, we pray. Amen.

FOR THOSE SERVING IN THE ARMED FORCES Almighty Lord, the warfare and strife in our world remain constant reminders of our sinfulness. We yearn for peace, dear Savior, as we journey to heaven. Protect those who defend our nation and keep them safe in your care. Assure them that they are never alone, for you watch over them. Strengthen their families with your love as they await the safe return of loved ones. Bless our nation and keep it strong that we may always be free to worship you. Amen.

HOLY COMMUNION Dear Jesus, you shed your blood and gave your body into death on the cross for my forgiveness. As I prepare to receive your Holy Supper, I confess that my sins made your cross necessary. Forgive me, my Savior, and strengthen me through your body and blood to serve you in gratitude. Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Have mercy on me and grant me your peace. Amen.

LUTHER'S MORNING PRAYER In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, your dear Son, that you have kept me this night from all harm and danger. Keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please you. Into your hands I commend my body and soul and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

LUTHER'S EVENING PRAYER In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, your dear Son, that you have graciously kept me this day. Forgive me all my sins, and graciously keep me this night. Into your hands I commend my body and soul and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

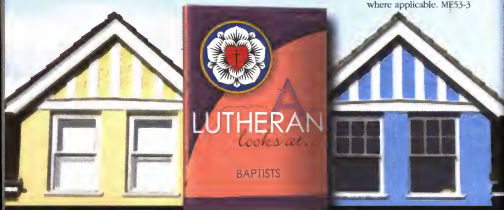
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